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Enhancing EFL Students' Idiomatic Competence: A Comparative Analysis of Lexical, Etymological, and Multimodal Approaches

Sulaiman Alnujaidi 

Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

Background: Given the importance of idiomatic expressions in second language learning on one hand and their complex lexical, syntactic, and semantic characteristics on the other hand, previous studies have proposed numerous instructional models for teaching idioms. However, despite the various instructional approaches available, there is a research gap comparing their effectiveness in enhancing idiomatic competence, which causes inconsistencies in teaching practices and underscores the need to identify the most effective methods for improving idiomatic competence.

Purpose: To examine and compare the impact of three approaches (Lexical, Etymological, and Multimodal) on enhancing EFL students' acquisition of idiomatic expressions and developing their overall idiomatic competence.

Method: The study used a quasi-experimental pre-test, post-test research design with three intact classes. Three groups of EFL students (n=66) were taught idiomatic expressions using different instructional approaches to compare their effectiveness. The first group (23 students) learned idioms through the Lexical Approach, the second group (22 students) through the Etymological Approach, and the third group (21 students) through the Multimodal Approach. Pre- and post-tests were administered to the three groups, and their scores were analyzed using a mixed model ANOVA to determine significant differences in within-subjects effects (changes in idiomatic competence over time) and between-subjects effects (differences among the instructional approaches: Lexical, Etymological, and Multimodal).

Results: The results demonstrated that there were statistically significant differences between the three approaches (Lexical, Etymological, & Multimodal) in terms of their effects on enhancing L2 learners' idiomatic competence. It was found that Multimodal group outperformed Lexical and Etymological groups significantly. No significant difference was found between Lexical and Etymological groups. This study suggests that the Multimodal Approach is highly effective for idiomatic competence development.

Conclusion: The study concluded that EFL teachers, curriculum developers, textbook designers, and researchers could implement the potentials of the Multimodal Approach to create more effective, interactive, and authentic environments for learning idiomatic expressions. Practical implications and further research recommendations were also suggested.

KEYWORDS

English as a foreign language (EFL), Idiomatic Competence, (SLA), Lexical Approach (LA), Etymological Approach (EA), Multimodal Approach (MA)

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Correspondence:
Sulaiman Alnujaidi,
ssnojeidi@imamu.edu.sa

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INTRODUCTION

Idiomatic expressions are a pervasive and indispensable component of native speaker discourse, often used to convey ideas succinctly and vividly across

diverse communicative settings such as news media, entertainment, and informal speech (Liontas, 2017; Cooper, 1999). Their idiomaticity reflects deep-rooted cultural, historical, and social knowledge, which adds pragmatic depth to spoken



and written language. For learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), acquiring idiomatic competence is not only key to linguistic proficiency but also essential for engaging meaningfully with authentic language use across cultural boundaries (Crowley et al., 2023; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2017).

Despite their ubiquity, idiomatic expressions present persistent challenges for EFL learners due to their metaphorical, non-literal, and culturally embedded meanings (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Prodromou, 2003). While native speakers use idioms fluidly and subconsciously, second-language learners tend to avoid them or use them inaccurately - a phenomenon described as the «idiomatic paradox» (Fellbaum, 2009). This gap between frequency of use and learner competence has been widely recognized as a stumbling block in achieving communicative fluency and sociolinguistic awareness in EFL contexts (Liontas, 1999; Irujo, 1986).

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has explored the role of idiomatic expressions in second language acquisition (Boers et al., 2004; Martinez & Schmitt, 2012; Liontas, 2015). Numerous studies have examined the cognitive difficulty of idioms (Irujo, 1986), their contribution to communicative and cultural competence (Cooper, 1999), and strategies for improving idiom retention and production (Boers, 2001; Vasiljevic, 2015). Instructional models based on lexical chunking (Lewis, 1997), etymological elaboration (Boers et al., 2007), and multimodal input (Freyn & Gross, 2017) have all been proposed, each drawing from distinct theoretical traditions.

However, the field remains fragmented. Most studies assess a single approach in isolation, which makes it difficult to evaluate the relative efficacy of competing methods. In addition, findings across studies are often contradictory or context-specific, which limits their generalizability and practical applicability (Birch et al., 2010; Zhang, 2009). As a result, language teachers are left without clear, evidence-based guidelines for selecting the most effective techniques for idiom instruction. This underscores the need for comparative, empirically grounded research that tests multiple instructional approaches within the same experimental design.

In response to this gap, the present study compares the effectiveness of three pedagogical approaches (the Lexical, Etymological, and Multimodal Approaches) for developing idiomatic competence among EFL learners. Each method targets idiom comprehension and retention through a different instructional mechanism: chunk-based memorization, historical-conceptual elaboration, and multisensory input, respectively. By applying a quasi-experimental design across three learner groups, the study offers a direct, systematic comparison of these instructional approaches.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) Is there any statistically significant difference between the effects of the Lexical, Etymological, and Multimodal approaches on enhancing idiomatic competence?
- (2) Which of these instructional approaches is most effective in developing EFL students' idiomatic competence?

Findings from this study are expected to inform EFL curriculum design and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how idioms can be effectively taught in diverse learning contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Idiomatic Competence

Based on the literature, formulaic sequences encompass all pre-fabricated word combinations stored and retrieved holistically from memory (Wray, 2002). Within this broad category, multiword expressions (MWEs) constitute a core subset of (semi-)fixed, recurrent phrases, including collocations, binomials, speech formulae, lexical bundles, and idioms (Sivanova-Chanturia & Martinez, 2015). Idioms are distinguished from other MWEs by their semantic non-compositionality: their conventionalized, figurative meanings (e.g., *spill the beans*, *pull someone's leg*) cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of their individual components (Irujo, 1986; Liontas, 2002; Grant & Bauer, 2004), though they exhibit structural diversity (Wolter, 2019) and exclude phrasal verbs.

Crucially, mastering idioms requires idiomatic competence, which extends Canale and Swain's (1980) sociolinguistic competence. Liontas (1999, 2015) defines idiomatic competence as the ability to understand and use idioms accurately and appropriately across varied sociocultural contexts, akin to native speakers. This competence integrates linguistic knowledge (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics) with pragmatic knowledge (sociolinguistic/functional, discourse, intercultural awareness) (Liontas, 2015), thereby bridging Canale and Swain's grammatical and sociolinguistic components.

This study operationally adopts Liontas' (2015) framework, positioning idioms as a specialized type of MWE defined by non-literal meaning and sociopragmatic embeddedness, whose effective use necessitates idiomatic competence—an advanced dimension of communicative competence rooted in Canale and Swain's foundational model.

Pedagogical Relevance of Idioms

Learning idiomatic expressions significantly enhances L2 learners' communicative, idiomatic, and cultural competence (Cooper, 1999; Crowley et al., 2023; De Caro, 2009;

Liontas, 1999). Furthermore, the ability to use and understand idioms allows learners to engage more fully in authentic conversations, which can boost their confidence and improve their fluency and proficiency (Irujo, 1986; Liontas, 2017). In addition, idioms often reflect the cultural values and societal norms of the language, which provide learners a deeper understanding of the target culture (Bennett, 1997; Boers et al., 2004; Lundblom & Woods, 2012; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2017). Despite their complex meanings and vivid imagery, which can be challenging to grasp (Geeraerts, 2002; Zhang, 2009), the frequent use of idioms in English underscores their importance (Cooper, 1999). The CEFR's inclusion of idioms in language curricula and proficiency tests further highlights their significance in language learning (Council of Europe, 2018; Iwashita & Vasquez, 2019¹; Kaneko, 2020; Read & Nation, 2006²).

Acquisition of Idiomatic Competence & Teaching Idiomatic Expressions

The lack of a systematic approach to teaching idiomatic expressions in a language classroom setting (Liontas, 2002) has triggered many researchers to propose several approaches and techniques to introduce idioms to L2 learners, enhance their learning of idiomatic expressions, and develop their overall idiomatic competence. Some of the proposed approaches within the scope of this study are: the Lexical Approach, the Etymological Approach, and the Multimodal Approach.

1. The Lexical Approach

The Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1997) prioritizes teaching pre-fabricated lexical «chunks» (e.g., idioms, collocations) as holistic units without grammatical decomposition. This method emphasizes lexical chunking and pedagogical simplicity, and advocates teaching idioms be as unanalyzed wholes to promote fluency (Lewis, 2000; Schmitt, 2000). Empirical studies support its efficacy: Tang (2012) reported improved use of lexical chunks in L2 writing, Li (2014) observed reduced L1 transfer in writing, Tang (2013) documented enhanced listening efficiency, and Brenes (2022) noted better comprehension of contextualized idioms. Criticisms highlight its lack of a structured syllabus, described as «a journey without maps» (Thornbury, 1998, p. 11). Skehan (1998, cited in Thornbury, 1998) further cautioned that over-reliance on memorization risks fossilization and limits generative language use.

2. The Etymological Approach

The Etymological Approach (Boers et al., 2007) employs idioms' historical origins to facilitate cognitive elaboration. Grounded in Dual Coding Theory, which involves verbal and visual processing (Clark & Paivio, 1991), and Levels of Processing Theory, where deeper analysis aids retention (Craik & Lockhart, 1972), the Etymological Approach evokes mental imagery of literal origins (e.g., *spill the beans* linked to ancient voting practices). Boers (2001) found etymological elaboration significantly improved idiom retention compared to contextual guessing. Liontas (2017) emphasized its role in cultural-historical insight. However, Zhang (2009) observed no advantage for receptive knowledge over rote learning, while Szczepaniak and Lew (2011) noted that etymological notes could distract learners or cause meaning confusion. Bakla et al. (2016) and Zarei and Rahimi (2014) similarly reported minimal retention benefits.

3. The Multimodal Approach

The Multimodal Approach uses digital tools (e.g., videos, apps) to integrate multisensory engagement (visual, auditory, textual modes) and support learner autonomy (Kress, 2003; Anstey & Bull, 2010). Studies confirm its strengths: Khoshnevisan (2019) observed enhanced motivation and idiom retention through multiple modes, Huang et al. (2022) reported superior long-term phrase acquisition versus unimodal input, and Freyn and Gross (2017) documented significant comprehension gains via digital storytelling. Implementation barriers include inequitable technology access, student adaptation difficulties, and increased teacher workload for resource creation (Romero & Bobkina, 2021). Mixed efficacy results exist: Birch et al. (2010) found no significant performance gains despite learner preference, and Cho and Kim (2021) noted no quality differences in multimodal versus monomodal writing outcomes. Teacher training gaps in digital pedagogy further hinder adoption (Romero & Bobkina, 2021).

Despite the volume of research supporting individual methods, findings across studies are inconsistent and context-dependent. Some emphasize retention (Boers et al., 2007), while others prioritize learner engagement (Khoshnevisan, 2019) or processing efficiency (Tang, 2013). Few studies have adopted a comparative lens to empirically test these methods within a controlled design. Moreover, differences in outcome variables (e.g., comprehension vs. production) and assessment tools limit comparability. These limitations

¹ Iwashita, N., & Vasquez, C. (2019). An examination of discourse competence at different proficiency levels in IELTS Speaking Part 2. *IELTS Research Report Series*, 5, 1–44. <https://www.ielts.org/for-researchers/research-reports/online-series-2015-5>

² Read, J., & Nation, P. (2006). An investigation of the lexical dimension of the IELTS speaking test. *IELTS Research Reports*, 6, 207–231. <https://www.ielts.org/for-researchers/research-reports/volume-06-report-7>

signal the need for integrative studies that can evaluate instructional efficacy across theoretical paradigms.

Taken together, the reviewed literature highlights the pedagogical value of idioms and outlines three major approaches to idiom instruction. However, the absence of comparative empirical research leaves educators without evidence-based guidance. To fill this gap, the present study directly compares the Lexical, Etymological, and Multimodal approaches to determine their relative effectiveness in fostering idiomatic competence among EFL learners.

METHOD

Research Design

The present study used a quasi-experimental pre-test, post-test research design using three intact classes taught by the researcher. One class, comprising 23 students, was taught idiomatic expressions through the Lexical Approach. The second class, including 22 students, was taught idiomatic expressions through the Etymological Approach. The third class, involving 21 students, was taught idiomatic expressions through the Multimodal Approach. Pre- and post-tests were applied to the three groups and the scores of the three groups were compared to determine whether there were any significant differences.

Participants

The total participants in this study were 66 male, college-level EFL students at a public university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Convenience non-random sampling was utilized; therefore, students were placed in three groups based on their classrooms. All the participants were native Arabic speakers studying English as a foreign language. The participants were homogeneous at the pre-intermediate and intermediate proficiency levels, which corresponds to (Level B1) on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). All students have studied English for seven years at school. However, their exposure to English in daily life is only limited to classroom environments and media outlets. At college, students are required to take two English courses (ENG-1 and ENG-2) during their first year of college study. These English courses emphasize the development of students' macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as well as their micro-skills (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) to prepare them for their academic courses in their field of study and for using English in their future professions.

Instruments & Procedures

Pre-Test

A pre-test was administered to the three groups on the first week to measure the participants' background knowledge on idiomatic expressions. After conducting the pre-test, the three groups were exposed to the target idiomatic expressions throughout 10 weeks in three different modes: the Lexical Approach group, the Etymological Approach group, and the Multimodal Approach group.

Post-Test

A post-test was conducted on the last week to check the target idiomatic expressions acquired by the participants in all groups and to find out whether there were any differences between the three groups. The post-test lasted for 45 minutes and included 30 multiple-choice items with three choices per idiom in which students were asked to choose the correct interpretation of the idiom. An example is presented below:

John accidentally spilled the beans about the new project during the meeting.

The idiomatic expression 'spilled the beans' means:

- a. to prepare a meal
- b. to reveal a secret
- c. to clean up a mess

Validity & Reliability

The validity and reliability of the pre- and post-tests were ensured through content checks and item testing with a separate group of students. The content checks were performed via a review by three EFL experts. These experts ensured that the test items comprehensively covered a representative sample of idiomatic expressions relevant to the study and also checked for face validity. Their feedback confirmed that the items appeared relevant and appropriate for measuring idiomatic competence. Test-retest reliability was evaluated by assessing the items with a subsample of 20 students from the target population who were not part of the study, taking the test with a two-week interval between the tests. A Pearson correlation test was conducted for reliability and returned a score of .83, indicating high stability of the test scores over time.

Procedure

For the purpose of this study, a quasi-experimental, three-group design was used to compare the impact of the three approaches: (1) Lexical, (2) Etymological, and (3) Multimodal.

al on improving EFL students' idiomatic competence. The present study was carried out over a period of 10 weeks and classes met two times a week (20 sessions). A number of 40 idiomatic expressions (see Appendix 1) were presented to the participants in all three groups over 20 sessions (2 idioms per session). The target idioms were selected from several sources including: *101 American English Idioms* (Collis, 1987), *Essential American Idioms* (Spears, 1999), and *Dictionary of Idioms and Their Origin* (Flavell, 1992).

In the Lexical Approach group, students were taught the target idiomatic expressions as whole chunks and with no analysis at the word level. At this stage, more emphasis was put on idiom meaning and usage rather than the meaning of the constituent words or the origin of the idioms as shown in the following example.

Spill the beans

Meaning: to reveal a secret

Examples:

1. Emily was so excited about her promotion that she spilled the beans before the official announcement.
2. Mark knew he had to be careful not to spill the beans about the confidential meeting.
3. We worked hard to keep it a secret, but he spilled the beans and told everyone.

In the Etymological Approach group, students were introduced to the origins of the target idiomatic expressions and the history of the changing meanings and forms of words which constitute those idiomatic expressions as shown in in the following example.

Spill the beans

Meaning: to reveal a secret

Etymology:

The phrase likely originates from an ancient Greek voting process involving beans. Voters would cast their ballots by placing one of two colored beans in a vase, with white beans typically indicating yes and black or brown beans indicating no. If someone spilled the beans, the secret results of the election would be prematurely revealed. Thus, «spilling the beans» came to mean disclosing confidential information.

In the Multimodal Approach group, students were presented with the target idiomatic expressions through a web-assisted language learning environment (Figure 1) where text, pictures, audios, and videos interactively provide the figura-

tive meaning of each idiomatic expression along with examples, exercises, and quizzes.

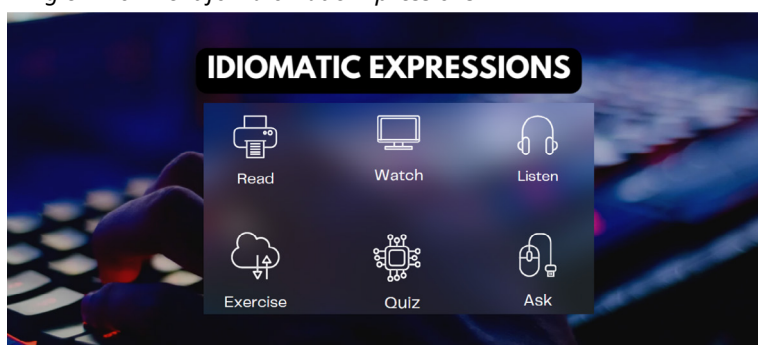
In all groups, students were introduced to the linguistic form and conceptual meaning of the idioms. L1 equivalent of the idioms were sometimes provided when students struggle to get the exact figurative meaning of the idiomatic expressions. To effectively correct students' mistakes with idioms, contextual learning was used by incorporating idioms into meaningful sentences and real-life scenarios, and engaging students in role-playing activities to practice idioms in conversation. Gentle corrections and positive reinforcement were provided when idioms were used correctly, and error analysis was conducted to discuss common mistakes and their underlying reasons, helping students understand and avoid these errors in the future. Exercises and quizzes were provided in the form of multiple-choice, matching, and fill-in-the-blank. However, in the Multimodal Approach group, exercises and quizzes were automated online and feedback was provided promptly and individually for students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an initial summary of the mean and standard deviation of idiomatic competence scores for each instructional approach group at both the pre-test and post-test stages. The mixed model ANOVA, also known as a within-between ANOVA, was utilized to analyze the data and address the research questions due to the study design incorporating both within-subjects factors (repeated measures) and between-subjects factors (independent groups). This type of ANOVA combines elements of both a one-way independent ANOVA and a one-way repeated-measures ANOVA (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). It was conducted to assess both the within-subjects effects (changes in *idiomatic competence* over time) and the between-subjects effects (differences among the instructional approaches: *Lexical*, *Etymological*, and *Multimodal*). This statistical method allows for the simultaneous examination of the main effects of time (*pre-test* vs. *post-test*) and instructional group (*Lexical*, *Etymological*, and *Multimodal*), as well as their interaction effect. This comprehensive approach was crucial for determining not only whether there were

Figure 1

A web-assisted language learning environment for Idiomatic Expressions



overall improvements in idiomatic competence but also whether these improvements varied significantly across the different instructional methods.

To identify the specific group differences following the significant findings from the mixed model ANOVA, post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test were conducted. This analysis was essential for pinpointing exactly where the statistically significant differences occurred between the groups. By comparing each pair of groups, the post hoc analysis provided a detailed understanding of the relative effectiveness of each instructional approach. These analyses collectively provided a robust framework for evaluating the instructional interventions, ensuring that the findings were both statistically rigorous and practically meaningful.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics of Idiomatic Competence Development

Descriptive statistics (Table 1) were calculated to provide an overview of the mean and standard deviation of idiomatic competence scores for each group at both pre-test and post-test stages. This helps in understanding the initial lev-

els of competence and the improvement after the intervention. The results show that all groups improved their scores from pre-test to post-test, indicating that each instructional approach had a positive effect on idiomatic competence. Notably, the Multimodal group exhibited the highest mean improvement, suggesting that while all instructional methods are beneficial, the Multimodal approach appears to offer the greatest enhancement.

Verification of Statistical Assumptions for Mixed-Model ANOVA

As this study employed the mixed model ANOVA, which includes both the within-subjects and between-subjects effects, it was necessary to meet three assumptions to ensure the equality of variances. The first assumption was normality, which ensures that the data are normally distributed. The second assumption was homogeneity of variance, relevant for between-subjects factors, to ensure that the variances within each group (e.g., the Lexical, Etymological, and Multimodal groups) were equal. The third assumption was sphericity, relevant for within-subjects factors, to ensure that the variances of the differences between all possible pairs of within-subject conditions (e.g., pre-test and post-test) were equal.

To assess the assumption of normality of the pre-test and post-test scores for each group, Shapiro-Wilk test (Table 2)

Table 1
Descriptive Results

Group		N	M	SD
Pre-test	Lexical	23	15.34	3.35
	Etymological	22	14.04	2.83
	Multimodal	21	13.61	2.74
Post-test	Lexical	23	20.13	2.86
	Etymological	22	21.22	3.23
	Multimodal	21	25.14	1.15

Table 2
Tests of Normality

Shapiro-Wilk Statistic				
Test	Group	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-test	Lexical	0.970	23	0.658
	Etymological	0.975	22	0.781
	Multimodal	0.968	21	0.549
Post-test	Lexical	0.985	23	0.945
	Etymological	0.979	22	0.873
	Multimodal	0.990	21	0.988

were conducted. The non-significant results ($p > 0.05$) indicate that the data is normally distributed and does not violate this assumption.

To test the assumption of homogeneity of variances, Levene’s Test (Table 3) was conducted. The non-significant p-value of the pre-test scores ($p = 0.200$) as well as the non-significant p-value of the post-test scores ($p = 0.127$) indicate that the assumption of homogeneity of variances has been met. These results confirm that the variances within each instructional group are equal, satisfying the assumption of homogeneity of variances necessary for conducting the mixed model ANOVA.

To test the assumption of sphericity, Mauchly’s Test (Table 4) was calculated. The non-significant p-value for the Time effect ($p = 0.059$) and Time*Group effect ($p = 0.060$) indicate that the assumption of sphericity has not been violated for either effect. Therefore, it was concluded that the variances of the differences between the conditions were equal, meeting the assumption of sphericity required for performing the mixed model ANOVA.

Mixed ANOVA Analysis of Within-Subjects and Between-Subjects Effects

The mixed model ANOVA, as shown in Table 5, was calculated to examine both the within-subjects effects (changes in idiomatic competence over time) and the between-subjects effects (differences between groups: *Lexical*, *Etymological*, and *Multimodal*) in a comprehensive manner. The significant main effect of time ($F(1, 64) = 234.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .781$) indicates that idiomatic competence scores improved significantly from pre-test to post-test across all groups, reflecting the overall effectiveness of the instructional interventions. The large effect size ($\eta^2 = .781$) suggests that a substantial proportion of the variance in idiomatic competence scores is attributable to the passage of time, reflecting the overall effectiveness of the instructional interventions. The significant interaction effect between time and group ($F(2, 64) = 20.88, p$

$< .001, \eta^2 = .402$) suggests that the improvement in idiomatic competence varied significantly depending on the instructional approach. The large effect size ($\eta^2 = .402$) suggests that the type of instructional intervention substantially influences how idiomatic competence scores change from pre-test to post-test. The significant intercept ($F(1, 64) = 1517.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .959$) reflects the overall level of idiomatic competence across all measurements, with a very large effect size ($\eta^2 = .959$). This high effect size indicates that the baseline level of idiomatic competence is consistently high across the sample. The significant main effect of instructional approach ($F(2, 64) = 9.82, p < .001, \eta^2 = .235$) indicates that there are significant differences in idiomatic competence among the three instructional approach groups. The medium effect size ($\eta^2 = .235$) indicates that the instructional approach accounts for a notable proportion of the variance in idiomatic competence scores. Overall, the significant main effects and interaction effects highlight the impact of the instructional approaches on enhancing idiomatic competence, showing notable improvements over time and differences between the groups. These findings imply that while all instructional approaches improve idiomatic competence, their effectiveness varies, with the interaction effect highlighting the differing impact over time.

The post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test, shown in Table 6, further clarify the differences between the instructional approaches. The results reveal that the Multimodal group significantly outperformed both the Lexical and Etymological groups ($p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.23$ for Lexical vs. Multimodal, Cohen’s $d = 1.10$ for Etymological vs. Multimodal). However, there was no statistically significant difference between the Lexical and Etymological groups ($p = .265$, Cohen’s $d = 0.30$). These findings imply that the Multimodal approach is significantly more effective than both the Lexical and Etymological approaches in enhancing idiomatic competence, while the Lexical and Etymological approaches are equally effective but less so compared to the Multimodal Approach. This under-

Table 3
Homogeneity of Variances (Levene’s Test)

Group	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Pre-Test Scores	1.65	2	63	0.200
Post-Test Scores	2.12	2	63	0.127

Table 4
Sphericity (Mauchly’s Test)

Effect	Mauchly’s W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Time	0.914	5.678	2	0.059
Time * Group	0.876	8.132	2	0.060

scores the superior efficacy of the Multimodal Approach in improving idiomatic competence among EFL students.

In summary, the combined results from these tables indicate that all instructional approaches positively impact idiomatic competence, with significant improvements observed over time. The Multimodal Approach is particularly effective, as demonstrated by its higher post-test scores and large effect sizes in the post hoc comparisons. These findings suggest that incorporating multiple modes of learning may provide a more comprehensive and effective method for teaching idiomatic expressions in a foreign language context.

DISCUSSION

Based on the study findings, there were statistically significant differences between the Lexical, Etymological, and Multimodal approaches in terms of their effect on developing L2 learners’ idiomatic competence. It was found that students’ idiomatic competence in the Multimodal Approach group was significantly better than their counterparts in the Lexical Approach group and the Etymological Approach group. It was also concluded that there was no statistically significant difference between the Lexical Approach group and the Etymological Approach group; thus implying that these two

approaches had no difference in their effect on L2 students’ idiomatic competence.

However, the high mean score observed in the Multimodal Approach group requires careful interpretation. Although the Multimodal Approach group exhibited a mean of 25.14, which was significantly different from other groups, this mean score accounts for only 62.5% of the total 40 items, which indicates that the overall performance may not necessarily reflect substantial learning. In other words, even though there was a measurable change in performance, it may not represent a substantial improvement in participants’ understanding or retention of idiomatic expressions. Several factors could contribute to this outcome. One potential explanation is the presence of a history effect. In this case, the treatment involved an extended duration, spanning ten weeks, during which participants were exposed to a total of 40 idioms (equating to an average of 4 idioms taught per week). This prolonged exposure to the material could have influenced participants’ performance on the post-test. Therefore, while the mean score of the Multimodal Approach group appears to differ significantly from other groups, the context of the study design, including the duration and intensity of the intervention, should be taken into account when interpreting these findings. Further analysis and consideration of other variables, such as individual

Table 5
Mixed Model ANOVA Results

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value	η ²
Within-Subjects Effects						
Time	824.48	1	824.48	234.35	.000	.781
Time*Group	146.87	2	73.44	20.88	.000	.402
Error (Time)	227.40	64	3.55			
Between-Subjects Effects						
Intercept	40779.60	1	40779.60	1517.47	.000	.959
Group	823.34	2	411.67	9.82	.000	.235
Error (Group)	1718.30	64	26.85			

Table 6
Tukey's HSD Post Hoc Tests

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Cohen's d
Lexical	Etymological	-1.09	0.49	.265	0.30
	Multimodal	-5.01*	0.49	.000	1.23
Etymological	Lexical	1.09	0.49	.265	0.30
	Multimodal	-3.92*	0.49	.000	1.10
Multimodal	Lexical	5.01*	0.49	.000	1.23
	Etymological	3.92*	0.49	.000	1.10

learning styles and engagement levels, may provide additional insights into the observed outcomes.

The results of this study are consistent with Lontos (2015) who concluded that multimodal learning environments facilitate idiomatic competence and make learning idiomatic expressions more authentic, more natural, and more effective as well as adhere to learners' individual differences. The findings are also analogous with Khoshnevisan (2019) who concluded that multimodality (audio and visual) affords teachers with diverse instructional modes that meet their students' needs, accommodate their diverse learning styles (auditory and visual), and contextualize idiom learning. In addition, the results are in accordance with those obtained by Fadel (2008) who found that learning through a multimodal-based approach that integrates multiple instructional modes results in better performance than a traditional-based approach that incorporates one mode only. The findings of the current study echo those obtained by Zhang (2021) who argued that integrating many modes, which trigger multi-sensory stimuli, can promote students' motivation, increase their auditory and visual input, and enhance their idiom recognition and understanding.

The conclusions drawn from the analysis underscore the critical role of the instructional approach in the effective teaching and learning of idiomatic expressions, which are essential for developing idiomatic competence and overall linguistic proficiency. Despite their importance, idiomatic expressions pose significant challenges in EFL classroom contexts. The inherent complexity of idiomatic expressions, with their figurative meanings diverging from literal interpretations, often creates barriers for learners. These barriers can lead to misunderstandings, confusion, and a tendency to avoid using idioms altogether. To address these challenges, it is crucial to explore and implement alternative instructional methods. Such methods may include contextual learning, visual aids, and interactive activities, which can facilitate a smoother transition from literal to figurative comprehension and improve overall idiomatic expression instruction. By focusing on innovative teaching strategies, educators can enhance students' understanding and usage of idiomatic expressions, which in turn fosters better linguistic competence and confidence in language use.

The findings highlight the remarkable efficacy of the Multimodal Approach in facilitating students' recognition and comprehension of idiomatic expressions. By incorporating diverse sensory modalities and interactive elements into the learning process, this approach offers students a multifaceted and engaging learning experience that fosters deeper understanding and retention of idiomatic structures and meanings. In contrast, the study reveals limited effectiveness in the chunking-based (Lexical) and origin-based

(Etymological) approaches in enhancing idiomatic comprehension and production. Despite their potential theoretical underpinnings, these traditional methods appear insufficient in addressing the nuanced complexities of idiomatic language for learners. These findings suggest that incorporating multimedia resources, interactive activities, and real-world contextualization into instruction can effectively alleviate the perceived complexity of idiomatic syntactic and semantic structures.

Overall, the conclusions drawn from the study underscore the pressing need for innovative and adaptive instructional strategies that cater to the diverse needs and learning preferences of students while effectively addressing the inherent challenges of idiomatic expression instruction. Through continued exploration and refinement of instructional approaches, EFL educators, teachers, and researchers can better equip learners with the idiomatic competence necessary for effective communication and language proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of the Multimodal Approach in enhancing EFL learners' idiomatic competence. By systematically comparing three instructional approaches, the research demonstrates that multimodal instruction leads to significantly better learner outcomes than both lexical chunking and etymological elaboration. This finding adds comparative depth to the existing literature, which has largely evaluated these methods in isolation.

The findings hold practical value for EFL practitioners seeking to address one of the most persistent challenges in language instruction: learners' difficulty with figurative and idiomatic language. Multimodal instruction (through its integration of visual, auditory, and contextual inputs) appears particularly well-suited to support learners with diverse cognitive profiles and preferences. Beyond teaching practice, the study also has implications for syllabus design and educational technology, which suggests that idiom learning can be improved by leveraging multimedia resources and interactive pedagogies.

While the results are promising, they should be interpreted within the context of certain limitations, including the homogeneity of the sample, the lack of delayed post-testing, and potential differences in instructional time across groups. Future research could extend these findings by incorporating a broader demographic base, exploring long-term retention, and integrating learner feedback on instructional experiences. Additional studies might also examine how multimodal

instruction interacts with idiom type, proficiency level, and cognitive learning style.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of work that calls for more innovative, context-responsive approaches to idiom instruction in EFL contexts. By demonstrating the comparative advantages of multimodal learning, it lays the groundwork for a more learner-centered, inclusive, and effective model of figurative language teaching - one that better prepares students for real-world communication and intercultural competence.

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APPENDIX 1

A List of 40 Metaphorical Expressions Used in the Study

	English	Figurative Meaning
1	<i>"a dead-end street"</i> e.g. <i>Their relationship is a dead-end street.</i>	experiencing very severe difficulties and looks likely to end very soon
2	<i>"a guinea pig"</i> e.g. <i>He volunteered to act as a guinea pig in the experiment.</i>	a subject of research, experimentation, or testing
3	<i>"add fuel to the fire"</i> e.g. <i>John only added fuel to the fire when he accused the other team of cheating.</i>	to do or say something that makes a miserable situation even worse
4	<i>"an open book"</i> e.g. <i>Sarah's feelings were written all over her face; she was truly an open book to everyone around her.</i>	to have nothing to hide
5	<i>"beat a dead horse"</i> e.g. <i>He keeps trying to explain it to him but I think he's beating a dead horse.</i>	to waste effort on something when there is no chance of succeeding
6	<i>"beat around the bush"</i> e.g. <i>Don't beat around the bush and tell me frankly what you think of my proposition.</i>	avoid talking about the main topic; not speaking directly or precisely; avoid the important point
7	<i>"behind the scenes"</i> e.g. <i>A lot of hard work has been going on behind the scenes.</i>	to do something secretly rather than publicly
8	<i>"bend over backwards"</i> e.g. <i>He bent over backwards trying to please his potential clients so that they would give him the contract.</i>	to do all in one's power (usually to achieve something or accommodate somebody); to make every effort to do something, especially to help someone
9	<i>"between the hammer and the anvil"</i> e.g. <i>She was between the hammer and the anvil when her parents asked her to choose between going to college or getting married.</i>	Facing two equally unpleasant, dangerous, or risky alternatives, where the avoidance of one ensures encountering the harm of the other.
10	<i>"bite off more than one can chew"</i> e.g. <i>By accepting two part-time jobs, he is clearly biting off more than he can chew.</i>	to try to do more than one is able to do; to attempt to do something which is hardly achievable
11	<i>"build castles in the air"</i> e.g. <i>I told him he should stop building castles in the air and train for a sensible profession.</i>	having extravagant hopes and plans that will never be carried out and entertaining daydreams that will never come to pass
12	<i>"burn the candle at both ends"</i> e.g. <i>Joseph's been burning the candle at both ends for weeks, working two jobs during the week and a third on weekends.</i>	To work very hard and for long hours, especially till late at night or the early hours of the morning
13	<i>"By the skin of one's teeth"</i> e.g. <i>We managed to complete the project on time by the skin of our teeth.</i>	to barely succeed or survive; a situation from which one has barely managed to escape or achieve something
14	<i>"by the sweat of one's brow"</i> e.g. <i>He earned his money by the sweat of his brow.</i>	by one's own hard work

	English	Figurative Meaning
15	<i>"chip off the old block"</i> e.g. <i>Stephen is a chip off the old block. He's a good football player, just like his father.</i>	someone who is similar to one's parents in behavior, character, or personality
16	<i>"cry over spilled milk"</i> e.g. <i>It's no use crying over spilled milk; it was a bad investment, the money has been lost, and there's nothing we can do.</i>	to cry about past events that cannot be undone; to feel sorry about something that has already happened
17	<i>"fan the flames"</i> e.g. <i>My sarcastic comment only fanned the flames during the argument I had with my wife.</i>	to make a situation worse
18	<i>"get caught red-handed"</i> e.g. <i>Tom was stealing the car when the police drove by and caught him red-handed.</i>	to get caught in the middle of doing something illegal or forbidden
19	<i>"get under my skin"</i> e.g. <i>The new manager is getting under my skin.</i>	to be irritating; to bother a person; to annoy someone
20	<i>"hit the nail on the head"</i> e.g. <i>Stephen hit the nail on the head when he said that what the company was lacking in was clear vision and focus.</i>	to say, do, or get something that is exactly right
21	<i>"jump through hoops"</i> e.g. <i>We had to jump through hoops to get my Dad admitted to hospital.</i>	to have to do a lot of things that seem difficult or unnecessary in order to achieve something
22	<i>"keep the wolf from the door"</i> e.g. <i>I don't earn much but it's enough to keep the wolf from the door.</i>	to have just enough money for basic things like food and somewhere to live
23	<i>"kill two birds with one stone"</i> e.g. <i>I killed two birds with one stone and picked the kids up on the way to the supermarket.</i>	to succeed in achieving two things in a single action
24	<i>"miss the train"</i> e.g. <i>He missed the train on that huge project.</i>	miss an opportunity
25	<i>"on cloud nine"</i> e.g. <i>Jim has been on cloud nine since his team won the game.</i>	overjoyed and extremely excited & happy
26	<i>"paint the town red"</i> e.g. <i>We are getting all dressed up next week and we are going to paint the town red.</i>	to celebrate and have a wild time; to go out and have a lot to drink
27	<i>"pull his leg"</i> e.g. <i>I think he was just pulling your leg when he said you've failed in the exam.</i>	to make fun of, fool, or tease someone
28	<i>"put all one's eggs in one basket"</i> e.g. <i>I'm applying for several jobs because I don't really want to put all my eggs in one basket.</i>	to depend for your success on a single person or plan of action
29	<i>"roll with the punches"</i> e.g. <i>Strong industries were able to roll with the punches during the recession.</i>	to be able to deal with a series of difficult situations
30	<i>"spill the beans"</i> e.g. <i>The employees spilled the beans about the mega project.</i>	to reveal a secret

	English	Figurative Meaning
31	<p><i>"spread oneself too thin"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>Working two jobs and trying to maintain a social life, Mary often feels like she's spreading herself too thin.</i></p>	to try to do too many things at the same time, so that you cannot give enough time or attention to any of them
32	<p><i>"swim with the tide"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>When I was a teenager, I had some radical opinions but I had to swim with the tide then.</i></p>	to go along or agree with the prevailing or popularly held opinion or perspective
33	<p><i>"take a shot in the dark"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>I don't have the map, but I'll take a shot in the dark and try to find the restaurant on my own.</i></p>	trying something without having all the necessary facts or details; taking a risk without a clear understanding of the potential outcomes
34	<p><i>"take the bull by the horns"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>You should take the bull by the horns and tell him to leave.</i></p>	hold things tightly
35	<p><i>"the apple of his eye"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>Tom's youngest daughter is the apple of his eye.</i></p>	someone whom you cherish above all others
36	<p><i>"the elephant in the room"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>The company is focusing on the wrong issue and ignoring the elephant in the room.</i></p>	An obvious truth or fact that is being intentionally ignored or left unaddressed
37	<p><i>"there's more than one way to skin a cat"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>I appreciate that you want to help me lose weight, but there's more than one way to skin a cat.</i></p>	there are many ways to do something, there are many ways to achieve a goal
38	<p><i>"turn a blind eye"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>The principal decided to turn a blind eye to the student's misconduct this time with a hope that they won't do it again.</i></p>	To deliberately overlook; to intentionally ignore something; to bend the rules; to make an exception
39	<p><i>"wet behind the ears"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>The new salesman's amateur techniques proved to everybody at the meeting that he was wet behind the ears.</i></p>	immature or poor skill; to be inexperienced; to be new at something or somewhere and so lack the necessary experience
40	<p><i>"with an iron hand"</i></p> <p>e.g. <i>For ten years, the President ruled with an iron hand.</i></p>	to rule, manage, or control a group of people very firmly, having complete power over everything they do

APPENDIX 2

A Sample of the Pre- and Post-tests

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1. *Their relationship is a dead-end street.*
The idiomatic expression "a dead-end street" means:
a) a place with no exit
b) a relationship with no future
c) a safe place to rest

 2. *He volunteered to act as a guinea pig in the experiment.*
The idiomatic expression "a guinea pig" means:
a) a small furry animal
b) a curious person
c) a test subject

 3. *John only added fuel to the fire when he accused the other team of cheating.*
The idiomatic expression "add fuel to the fire" means:
a) to make a bad situation worse
b) to help someone win
c) to encourage teamwork

 4. *Sarah's feelings were written all over her face; she was truly an open book to everyone around her.*
The idiomatic expression "an open book" means:
a) a very emotional person
b) a person who hides nothing
c) a good writer

 5. *He keeps trying to explain it to him but I think he's beating a dead horse.*
The idiomatic expression "beating a dead horse" means:
a) to insist on something pointless
b) to punish someone too harshly
c) to give up quickly

 6. *Don't beat around the bush and tell me frankly what you think of my proposition.*
The idiomatic expression "beat around the bush" means:
a) to walk in circles
b) to avoid getting to the point
c) to speak too quickly

 7. *A lot of hard work has been going on behind the scenes.*
The idiomatic expression "behind the scenes" means:
a) at a theater
b) in a private or hidden way
c) after the event ends

 8. *He bent over backwards trying to please his potential clients so that they would give him the contract.*
The idiomatic expression "bent over backwards" means:
a) to try very hard to help someone
b) to change one's opinion
c) to stretch before working

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9. *She was between the hammer and the anvil when her parents asked her to choose between going to college or getting married.*
The idiomatic expression "between the hammer and the anvil" means:
- a) to face a difficult choice
 - b) to feel crushed by pressure
 - c) to be in a crowded place
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10. *By accepting two part-time jobs, Tom is clearly biting off more than he can chew.*
The idiomatic expression "biting off more than he can chew" means:
- a) to overeat during meals
 - b) to accept more responsibility than one can handle
 - c) to speak with food in one's mouth
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11. *I told him he should stop building castles in the air and train for a sensible profession.*
The idiomatic expression "building castles in the air" means:
- a) to construct tall buildings
 - b) to have unrealistic dreams or plans
 - c) to become a famous architect
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12. *Joseph's been burning the candle at both ends for weeks, working two jobs during the week and a third on weekends.*
The idiomatic expression "burning the candle at both ends" means:
- a) to stay home all day
 - b) to spend money carelessly
 - c) to overwork or exhaust oneself
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13. *We managed to complete the project on time by the skin of our teeth.*
The idiomatic expression "by the skin of our teeth" means:
- a) with great effort and just barely
 - b) with no effort at all
 - c) in a painful way
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14. *Jane earned his money by the sweat of her brow.*
The idiomatic expression "by the sweat of her brow" means:
- a) through hard physical or mental work
 - b) by stealing or cheating
 - c) in a cool and relaxed manner
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15. *John accidentally spilled the beans about the new project during the meeting.*
The idiomatic expression 'spilled the beans' means:
- a) to prepare a meal
 - b) to reveal a secret
 - c) to clean up a mess
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