

# A Quantitative Analysis of Students' English Idiomatic Competence at a University in Vietnam

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**Abstract**—Idioms undoubtedly play a crucial role in language acquisition and should be a fundamental component of language teaching and learning. Idioms provide insights into the target language's culture and foster learners' communicative competence. Structurally, idioms are divided into idiomatic pairs, comparative idioms, and ordinary idioms (Giang, 2018). Semantically, idioms can be transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, or opaque (Fernando & Flavell, 1981; Giang, 2018). The research aimed to determine whether Vietnamese university students learning English for over 10 years were familiar with selected English idioms. It also sought to assess if they could correctly connect these idioms to their meanings and use them effectively in sentences. This study employed a quantitative approach to process the results of the receptive and productive tests issued to 454 final-year non-English major students at a university in Vietnam. The findings indicate that the students possess limited knowledge of English idioms, especially idiomatic pairs and ordinary idioms. This study also offers recommendations for enhancing Vietnamese students' English idiomatic competence.

**Index Terms**—quantitative analysis, idioms, idiomatic competence, receptive test, productive test

## I. INTRODUCTION

Chomsky (1965) introduced the idea of generative grammar, which he defined as how language systems are utilized in communication. He also made a distinction between linguistic performance and competence. According to him, competence must be investigated separately from language use or performance and is unaffected by grammatically created irrelevant situations. However, many other linguists quickly contested this hypothesis, particularly those who focused on the sociolinguistics, cognitive, and psycholinguistics fields, which explore the social dimensions of language usage. Many others viewed Chomsky's (1965) distinction between performance and linguistic competence as empirical since it minimizes the significance of speech, language use, psychological information, discourse, sociocultural viewpoints, nonverbal communication, and the speaker's goals. Later, pragmatists studied these topics under "pragmatic competence".

Communicative competence consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic (Hymes, 1972). Linguistic competence is the ability to use grammar and vocabulary. According to this definition of linguistic competence, vocabulary and grammar should be taught in relation to themes and issues rather than separately. According to OECDilibrary (2009), linguistic competencies have a variety of uses, particularly in oral, written, and Information Communication Technology (ICT) contexts where they are expressed in native and foreign languages. Using language to express and interpret thoughts, emotions, facts, and standpoints to conduct oral and written debates is considered a key component of linguistic competence. The social and cultural circumstances in which these exchanges occur can impact several aspects of written and spoken language, including syntax, pragmatics, and sociolinguistic traits.

It has long been accepted in the study of second language acquisition that speakers or learners of a second language have underlying linguistic competence represented in a complicated linguistic system known as "vocabulary". Obviously, language knowledge is crucial to helping people have genuine, native-like discussions. However, vocabulary is not just a collection of terms whose definitions are instantly apparent at a glance. English is full of idioms, and people who speak it regularly employ a wide range of idiomatic expressions that do not have literal meanings (Brenner, 2013). According to Cowie et al. (1993, p. x), "The accurate and appropriate use of expressions which are, in the broadest sense, idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of the language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners." In other words, idiomatic competence is one trait that distinguishes native proficiency in a particular language. Therefore, it is impossible to spontaneously improve a language without acquiring idioms, an essential component of language (Giang, 2018).

English language learners in Vietnam are assessed using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) or international testing systems including TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC. The overall English proficiency of university graduates is expected to be at the C1 level in the CEFR or equivalent for students majoring in English and the B1 level in the CEFR or equivalent for non-English major students. By investigating the idiomatic competence of the final-year non-English major students, the results serve as valuable references for language teachers, training program developers, and anyone involved in the English language learning and teaching process. These are the questions that this study aims

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to answer:

1. How much do students understand the idiomatic meanings?
2. To what extent do students use idioms in sentences?

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### A. Defining Idioms

It is commonly asserted that idioms fall into a multidimensional lexical space with rhetorical, discursive, poetic, syntactic, and semantic qualities (Nunberg et al., 1994). Idioms have been examined from several perspectives. The focus of attention shifts from form and fixity (formal features of idioms) to metaphoricity and literal degree (semantic features of idioms). It is challenging to define idioms in a way that takes into account all of their characteristics (Gibbs, 1994; Moon, 1998; Nenonen et al., 2002; Taylor, 2002; Langlotz, 2006; Giang, 2018). Idiom definitions have changed over time, ranging from the prototypical to the flexible (Liu, 2003). This section will highlight some common and influential definitions of idioms. An idiom has been variously defined as:

(i) “the form of speech peculiar or proper to a people or country; own language or tongue”, “peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one” (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1961, pp. 21-22).

(ii) “[a] group of words with set meanings that cannot be calculated by adding up the separate meanings of the parts. Some idioms are virtually unchangeable. Others allow a limited amount of manipulation. Some idioms allow certain transformations but not others” (Bolinger, 1975, p. 100).

(iii) “[a group of words whose] form is set and only a limited number of idioms can be said or written in any other way without destroying the meaning of the idiom. Many are completely rigid and cannot show up in any other form whatever” (Makkai et al., 1975, p. vi).

(iv) “a fixed phrase that has its special meaning. It is often impossible to guess the meaning of the whole phrase from the meanings of the separate words that is formed from” (Longman Dictionary of Language and Culture, 1992, p. 12).

(v) “its meaning is not a function of the meanings of its parts and the way these are syntactically combined; that is, an idiom is a non-compositional expression” (van der Linden, 1992, p. 223).

(vi) “a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit” (Hornby, 1995, p. 67).

(vii) “an indivisible unit whose components cannot be varied or varied only within definable limits. No other words can be substituted for those comprising. Nor are the words of an idiom usually recombinable” (Fernando, 1996, p. 30).

Idioms have been defined using several different criteria. Conventionality, non-compositionality, and fixity are idioms' characteristics (Moon, 1998). Beyond this point, however, little consensus about idioms has been obtained. In actuality, there has been some recent discussion on this topic. Lakoff (1987) also argued that because idioms are syntactically and semantically non-standard, the traditional and well-tested processes, criteria, and methodologies developed for everyday language and its related phenomena do not apply to idioms. An idiom does, in fact, have its typical qualities. In this study, an idiom, according to Minh et al. (2024, p. 3207), “(1) is a phrase whose components are commonly fixed; (2) is considered a complex scene with a bipartite semantic composition that can be analyzable: a literal reading and an idiomatic reading; (3) has meaning that usually differs from the literal meanings of its components but is at least partly motivated; (4) conveys a pure concept”.

### B. Classifying Idioms

There have been various attempts to categorize idioms in English (Fernando & Flavell, 1981; Seidl & McMordie, 1988; Cowie et al., 1993; Nunberg et al., 1994; Fernando, 1996; Moon, 1998; Giang, 2018; etc.). According to Fernando and Flavell (1981, p. 30), idioms are divided into “two main headings, which in practice usually overlap to some extent: the ‘formal’ idiom family and the ‘concept’ idiom family”. A group of idioms with a similar grammatical pattern and at least one lexical item are referred to as the ‘formal’ idiom family; conversely, the ‘concept’ idiom family includes pairs like *bury the hatchet* and *dig up the hatchet*.

Seidl and McMordie (1988) provided eight groups of idioms based on the parts of speech issues: key words with idiomatic uses; idioms with nouns and adjectives; idiomatic pairs; idioms with prepositions; phrasal verbs; verbal idioms; idioms with key words from special categories; and idioms with comparisons. In terms of grammatical structures, Cowie, Mackin, and McCaig (1993) classified English idioms into clause patterns, possessive clause patterns, phrase patterns, and noun phrase patterns with repeated elements. Idiomatic phrases and idiomatically combining expressions are the two categories of idioms that Nunberg et al. (1994) listed from a cognitive standpoint. English idioms are also further classified into three groups: literal, semi-literal, and pure (Fernando, 1996).

The classifications of idioms above make it evident that English idioms are traditionally classified due to their syntactic features, while the categorization of idioms from a cognitive standpoint is based on their semantic features. Semantically, Fernando and Flavell (1981) gave four types of idioms: transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, and opaque. From a discursive and pragmatic perspective, Fernando (1996) stated that there are three groups of idioms in English: ideational idioms (e.g., *night cap*, *spill the beans*, *as bold as brass*, etc.); interpersonal idioms (e.g., *so long*, *never mind*, etc.); relational idioms (e.g., *so far*, *by the way*, *last but not least*, etc.). Functionally, Moon (1998) and

collaborators distinguished five classes of idioms: informational (e.g., *in the red*, *shrug one's shoulders*, *wear and tear*, etc.); evaluative (e.g., *work wonders*, *wash one's hands off something*, *a different kettle of fish*, etc.); situational (e.g., *walls have ears*, *talk of the devil*, *long time, no see*, etc.); modalizing (e.g., *mark one's words*, *more or less*, *at all*, *in effect*, etc.); organizational (e.g., *in short*, *all in all*, *on the other hand*, etc.).

In this study, idioms are divided into idiomatic pairs, comparative idioms, and ordinary idioms (Giang, 2018). According to Giang (2018), idiomatic pairs can be transparent, semi-opaque, or opaque; comparative idioms can be semi-transparent or semi-opaque; and ordinary idioms can be transparent, semi-opaque, or opaque.

### C. Idiomatic Competence

Idiomatic competence has been explored in relation to communicative competence, drawing inspiration from Chomsky (1965), Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), and Celce-Murcia (2008). Celce-Murcia (2008) stated that using idioms is a part of formulaic competence in the model of communicative competence. According to Celce-Murcia (2008), formulaic competence is the ability to choose and employ fixed chunks or stretches of language when communicating. Idiomatic competence, which is a subset of formulaic competence, is the capacity to use idioms effectively when speaking as both an addressor and an addressee (Burke, 1988; Buckingham, 2006). It facilitates communication by completely encoding and decoding the meaning of a discourse.

Knowles (2004) delineated five stages of the learning process: familiarization, recognition, comprehension, mastery, and automaticity. Once students have achieved automaticity, they can confidently converse in the language they are learning. Knowles (2004) contended that exposure to the target language and practice of phrases and thought groups can lead to automaticity. This suggests that language learners should be exposed to and practice idioms frequently in order to be proficient in using idioms in conversation.

### D. Measuring Idiomatic Competence

Measuring idiomatic competence has challenges. It is possible to characterize academically the features of word knowledge, but it is generally impractical to create a test that measures several properties of words, including positions, meanings, shapes, and functions (Zareva et al., 2005). Some popular models for assessing vocabulary knowledge center on two factors: size and quality (Richards, 1976; Nation, 2001). To provide another dimension of vocabulary development, Henriksen (1999) gave a model that includes the receptive and productive management of words in communication. Since idioms are unique language entities, idiomatic competence can be measured using the characteristics listed above. It should ascertain how many and what kind of idioms a student can understand and apply to discourse.

## III. METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research, according to Bryman and Cramer (2012), is a research approach that validates data collection. Starting with how many, what other, and, to some extent, the quantitative study aims to examine the answers to research problems (Rasinger, 2013). The approach emphasizes measuring a variable or variables in the social world. Rashid and Sipahi (2021) asserted that quantitative research is crucial to language evaluation and testing. The present study uses quantitative research to uncover the students' idiomatic competence through test activities.

### A. Research Setting

The study was conducted at a military medical university where English as a foreign language is taught across eight semesters, with thirty sessions per semester. The course books for general English (GE) classes in semesters one through six are *Life* (levels A1–A2) and *Bridge to IELTS* (bands 3.5–4.5). GE aids in providing the students with a basic comprehension of English. In order to prepare the students for success in the English for Specific Purposes classes over the next two semesters, the teachers focus on helping the students strengthen their four fundamental language skills. According to university regulations, the overall English proficiency of the students upon graduation is at the B1 level in the CEFR or equivalent. In other words, students have to pass the B1 English proficiency exams organized by the university or have equivalent international English certificates before graduation.

### B. Participants

In order to achieve the aim of the research, 454 final-year non-English major students with level B1 English proficiency were selected to participate in the study. There are 434 male students (95.59%) among the final-year participants, who range in age from 22 to 24. In fact, these students started learning English when they were in primary schools. In other words, they have studied English for more than 10 years.

### C. Data Collection Instruments

The students were given two written assessments: the receptive test as the first activity and the productive test as the second activity. In the first test, the students were asked to match thirty idioms with their meanings, with ten idiomatic pairs, ten comparative idioms, and ten ordinary idioms (see Table 1).

TABLE 1  
IDIOMS AND THEIR MEANINGS

Idioms	Answers	Meanings
1. <i>safe and sound</i>		fair, honest
2. <i>like water off a duck's back</i>		slowly but inevitably
3. <i>kick the bucket</i>		absolute wrong or right, without recognizing any more subtle variations
4. <i>black and white</i>		very busy
5. <i>spill the beans</i>		stop an argument and become friends again
6. <i>like a cat on hot bricks</i>		tell people secret information
7. <i>wear and tear</i>		very happy about something
8. <i>a piece of cake</i>		drink too much alcohol
9. <i>as happy as a lark</i>		something that is very easy to do
10. <i>sick and tired</i>		very strange, foolish, or crazy
11. <i>hit the hay</i>		gentle, quiet, and obedient
12. <i>wine and dine</i>		at a time that is far away in the future
13. <i>as busy as a bee</i>		very calm or very calmly, especially when this is surprising
14. <i>fair and square</i>		completely unexpected
15. <i>as mad as a hatter</i>		make an argument or bad situation worse
16. <i>short and sweet</i>		go out and enjoy yourself by drinking alcohol, dancing, laughing with friends, etc.
17. <i>add fuel to the fire</i>		feel ill
18. <i>like a dog with two tails</i>		work very hard
19. <i>under the weather</i>		go to bed in order to sleep
20. <i>ins and outs</i>		wearied, bored, exasperated, irritated by somebody/something
21. <i>in the long run</i>		all of the details; insider knowledge
22. <i>as cool as a cucumber</i>		completely; with all one's energies, devotion
23. <i>paint the town red</i>		quick and accomplishing the main goal
24. <i>body and soul</i>		make little, or no, impression; have no effect
25. <i>bury the hatchet</i>		nervous(ly); unable to sit/lie still, settle one's attention
26. <i>work like a dog</i>		deterioration and damage from (continued) use
27. <i>like a lamb</i>		die
28. <i>out of the blue</i>		very happy
29. <i>slowly but surely</i>		unharmd; secure against (further) harm
30. <i>drink like a fish</i>		provide someone with a nice dinner and special treatment

It is noted that the meanings of the idioms in Table 1 are taken from *Oxford dictionary of English idioms* by Cowie et al. (2011). Furthermore, in order to determine that the idioms used in the tests are popular, they are searched for on Google. The data from Google searches shows that each idiom has more than two million results.

The second test was created to assess students' productive understanding of idioms since the participants were required to utilize idioms from the prior activity in sentences containing gaps (see Table 2).

TABLE 2  
IDIOMS IN SENTENCES

Idioms	Answers	Sentences
1. safe and sound		The exam was _____.
2. like water off a duck's back		One day, _____, she announced that she was leaving.
3. kick the bucket		The whole country is _____ after our team won the World Cup.
4. black and white		I'm _____ of listening to him complain. He needs to quit his job.
5. spill the beans		I have a busy day tomorrow, so I think I'll _____.
6. like a cat on hot bricks		Did you really have to _____ at my office holiday party? I got drunk then.
7. wear and tear		The company _____ me because they want me to accept the proposal.
8. a piece of cake		She'd followed him _____. She hadn't asked him why he was taking her to a medical research laboratory rather than to a normal hospital or clinic.
9. as happy as a lark		The President said he wouldn't _____ by commenting without knowing all the facts.
10. sick and tired		The first ingredient acts on weeds through the leaf and _____ kills them.
11. hit the hay		My mom is _____ around Christmastime.
12. wine and dine		We'll all be there at 6 for the surprise party. Now don't _____!
13. as busy as a bee		He looked at all the evidence before he made a decision. It was _____.
14. fair and square		Can't you two just _____?
15. as mad as a hatter		The meeting was _____, just as I like it.
16. short and sweet		Jenny, you're _____. I wish you'd either sit down with a book or some sewing, or go out for a walk.
17. add fuel to the fire		Lucy will be _____ if she gets into the team.
18. like a dog with two tails		If you want to be a lawyer, be prepared to _____ day after day.
19. under the weather		I'm feeling a bit _____. I think I'm getting a cold.
20. ins and outs		There's a lot of _____ on my car.
21. in the long run		He's been warned of the dangers of smoking but it's _____.
22. as cool as a cucumber		He has been working there for twenty years. He knows all of the _____ of the office.
23. paint the town red		Not everything is _____.
24. body and soul		It seems a lot of effort but I'm sure it's the best solution _____.
25. bury the hatchet		She walked in _____, as if nothing had happened.
26. work like a dog		Don't take a job in that company: they think they own their employees _____.
27. like a lamb		After a long day of hiking, Dan arrived home _____.
28. out of the blue		I'm ready to _____ with a few of my closest friends.
29. slowly but surely		All the money goes to her when they _____.
30. drink like a fish		Her sister's _____ and if you ask me she's not much better herself.

D. Research Procedure

The research sample was chosen deliberately since the intended participants in this study were final-year non-English major students with level B1 English proficiency. A list of the 454 students who participated in the study was created. Every student was assigned a unique ID, which helped identify them throughout the entire research project. The research procedure consists of the following two steps:

Step 1: 454 students from eight classes received receptive tests at the same time with the help of eight English teachers. The students were told to connect 30 idioms with their meanings. For roughly five minutes, the participants heard instructions on how to do the tests. After that, they had 30 minutes to complete the test.

Step 2: The students were asked to finish the productive test. In this step, students used idioms from the previous test in sentences containing gaps. They also had 30 minutes for this task.

Quantitative data was brought into Excel. The students' correct answers were totalled, converted to percentages, and displayed as tables. Following that, a descriptive and interpretive analysis was used to combine the data. In brief, the data were displayed, analyzed, and interpreted to reach concluding remarks.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Students' Competence in the Reception and Use of Idiomatic Pairs

In English, idiomatic pairs are considered a unique category of idioms. They possess the capacity to be analyzed and have meanings that are at least somewhat driven (Giang, 2018). Semantically, idiomatic pairs can be transparent or semi-opaque (Giang, 2018). It is clear that the literal reading and idiomatic meaning of transparent idiomatic pairs closely relate to each other. To some extent, they are the same, i.e., the idiomatic meaning can be worked out through the component parts without any analyzability or motivation. *Slowly but surely* is an example since it is paraphrasable

as “slowly but inevitably”. For semi-opaque idiomatic pairs, their component parts are quite opaque but possibly interpretable. Let’s have a look at *body and soul* (completely). There are always two parts to a man: *body* and *soul*. *Soul* is of spiritual value, whereas *body* is of material value. It means that *body* and *soul* refer to a whole man, from which the idiomatic meaning of the idiom can be derived.

TABLE 3  
CORRECT ANSWERS PER IDIOMATIC PAIR

Idiomatic pairs	Results of receptive test		Results of productive test	
	Correct answers	%	Correct answers	%
<i>safe and sound</i>	185	40.75	162	35.68
<i>black and white</i>	143	31.50	121	26.65
<i>wear and tear</i>	136	29.96	127	27.97
<i>sick and tired</i>	362	79.74	310	68.28
<i>wine and dine</i>	97	21.37	74	16.30
<i>fair and square</i>	201	44.27	186	40.97
<i>short and sweet</i>	178	39.21	167	36.78
<i>ins and outs</i>	165	36.34	155	34.14
<i>body and soul</i>	142	31.28	122	26.87
<i>slowly but surely</i>	389	85.68	265	58.37
Mean	199.8	44.00	168.9	37.20

The proportion and mean of the students who correctly answered each idiomatic pair on the tests are displayed in Table 3. The percentage of correct answers to each idiom was quite low (below 50%), and there was a little difference between the average results (means) of the receptive and productive tests (44.00% and 37.20%, respectively). The idioms that the students had difficulty with were semi-opaque. They found it the most difficult with *wine and dine* since the accuracy percentage was only 21.37% in the receptive test and 16.30% in the productive test. However, most students gave correct answers to *slowly but surely* (85.68%) and *sick and tired* (79.74%) in the first activity. In the second activity, the accuracy percentages for these idioms were 58.37% and 68.28%. The reason for this success was that idioms are transparent. Since students had to complete a more challenging task in the second test, their success rate was lower. Generally, the students did not show very good receptive and productive knowledge of idiomatic pairs.

#### B. Students’ Competence in the Reception and Use of Comparative Idioms

Comparative idioms can be semi-transparent or semi-opaque (Giang, 2018). The semi-transparent property of comparative idioms involves both explicit and implicit component parts. The idiomatic meaning comes from one component part of the idiom. *As busy as a bee* (very busy) is an example. The idiomatic meaning is focused on *busy*. *As a bee* indicates the degree of *busy*. The constituents of semi-opaque comparative idioms are quite opaque but possibly interpretable. For example, *like water off a duck’s back* is paraphrasable as “making little, or no, impression; having no effect”. Water resistance is one of the characteristics of the feathers; therefore, putting water on the duck’s back has no effect. It means that the duck’s back is not able to hold water. This enables us to understand why sometimes our efforts yield unintended consequences.

TABLE 4  
CORRECT ANSWERS PER COMPARATIVE IDIOM

Comparative idioms	Results of receptive test		Results of productive test	
	Correct answers	%	Correct answers	%
<i>like water off a duck’s back</i>	394	86.78	237	52.20
<i>like a cat on hot bricks</i>	196	43.17	177	38.99
<i>as happy as a lark</i>	445	98.01	294	64.76
<i>as busy as a bee</i>	441	97.14	312	68.72
<i>as mad as a hatter</i>	438	96.48	322	70.93
<i>like a dog with two tails</i>	192	42.29	173	38.11
<i>as cool as a cucumber</i>	415	91.41	338	74.45
<i>work like a dog</i>	366	80.62	277	61.01
<i>like a lamb</i>	222	48.90	185	40.75
<i>drink like a fish</i>	289	63.66	231	50.88
Mean	339.8	74.85	254.6	56.08

Table 4 illustrates the accuracy percentage of students’ answers per comparative idiom in the receptive and productive tests. The mean of the first activity was relatively high (74.85%). There was a significant decrease of 18.77% in the mean of the second activity. In the receptive task, the students were well-familiar with the idioms having explicit component parts such as *as happy as a lark* (98.01%), *as busy as a bee* (97.14%), *as mad as a hatter* (96.48%), and *as cool as a cucumber* (91.41%). The comparative idioms that caused the students the most difficulty were *like a dog with two tails* (42.29%), *like a cat on hot brick* (43.17%), and *like a lamb* (48.90%). Nevertheless, it was easy for them to give a correct answer to *like water off a duck’s back* (86.78%). Perhaps this idiom is similar to *nước đổ đầu vịt* (like water off a duck’s head) in Vietnamese. With a mean score of 56.08%, the students’ actual application of idioms

in sentences was less successful in the productive test. In general, the results from Table 4 indicate that the students' receptive and productive knowledge of comparative idioms is quite good.

C. Students' Competence in the Reception and Use of Ordinary Idioms

Ordinary idioms are the most popular kind of idiom in English (Giang, 2018). Semantically, ordinary idioms are also related to the analyzability of their component parts. Based on the link between literal reading and idiomatic meaning, the motivation degrees of ordinary idioms are divided into transparent, semi-opaque, and opaque (Giang, 2018). Although there are some transparent ordinary idioms, most of them are semi-opaque or opaque. There is no connection between the literal reading and the idiomatic meaning of the idioms that are totally opaque (Langlotz, 2006). Nonetheless, they may be somewhat inspired by conventional knowledge.

TABLE 5  
CORRECT ANSWERS PER ORDINARY IDIOM

Ordinary idioms	Results of receptive test		Results of productive test	
	Correct answers	%	Correct answers	%
<i>kick the bucket</i>	42	9.25	51	11.23
<i>spill the beans</i>	53	11.67	46	10.13
<i>a piece of cake</i>	64	14.10	57	12.56
<i>hit the hay</i>	39	8.59	44	9.69
<i>add fuel to the fire</i>	77	16.96	69	15.20
<i>under the weather</i>	25	5.51	30	6.61
<i>in the long run</i>	55	12.11	48	10.57
<i>paint the town red</i>	37	8.15	32	7.05
<i>bury the hatchet</i>	58	12.78	43	9.47
<i>out of the blue</i>	29	6.39	31	6.83
Mean	47.9	10.55	45.1	9.93

For ordinary idioms, the students were unsuccessful since the accuracy percentages shown in Table 5 were very low. The mean of the receptive test was 10.55%, and that of the productive test was even lower (9.93%). The students had the most difficulty matching *under the weather* with its meaning, with an accuracy proportion of only 5.51%, followed by *out of the blue* (6.39%), and *paint the town red* (8.15%). The idioms *add fuel to the fire* and *a piece of cake* brought them fewer challenges (16.69% and 14.10% accuracy, respectively). That *add fuel to the fire* in English and *thêm dầu vào lửa* (add fuel to the fire) in Vietnamese are the same makes students find it easier to finish the task. Interestingly, the students who gave more correct answers to some ordinary idioms such as *kick the bucket*, *hit the hay*, *under the weather*, and *out of the blue* in the productive activity than those in the receptive activity.

D. Students' Competence According to Different Types of Idioms

Table 6 presents the means of the students' correct answers to each kind of idiom in the receptive and productive tests. The average accuracy percentage of the students' correct answers to all selected idioms was relatively low in both receptive and productive activities (42.87% and 34.40%, respectively). These figures indicate that there was a remarkable difference between the results of the first activity and those of the second one. It decreased by 8.47% in the accuracy mean of the productive activity compared to the previous activity. It means that the students had more difficulty with the use of idioms than with reception. In the first activity, the students were quite successful with comparative idioms (74.85%), since most of these idioms have explicit component parts (Giang, 2018). Idiomatic pairs are the idioms that the students were not very successful with, accounting for 44.00% on average. The students had the most difficulty with ordinary idioms, which are mostly semi-opaque or opaque. In the second activity, the students' correct answers were even lower than those in the previous activity, especially ordinary idioms. The accuracy mean of ordinary idioms in use was only 9.93%, and that of idiomatic pairs was 37.20%. These findings indicate that the students were unfamiliar with ordinary idioms and idiomatic pairs.

TABLE 6  
STUDENTS' IDIOMATIC COMPETENCE ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT TYPES OF IDIOMS

Results of receptive test				Results of productive test			
Mean				Mean			
Idiomatic pairs	Comparative idioms	Ordinary idioms	All idioms	Idiomatic pairs	Comparative idioms	Ordinary idioms	All idioms
44.00	74.85	10.55	42.87	37.20	56.08	9.93	34.40

V. CONCLUSION

The study investigates the students' idiomatic competence from both receptive and productive perspectives. The results revealed that students possessed limited knowledge of idioms since their average accuracy percentages were 42.87% and 34.40%, respectively. Although students were quite successful in comparative idioms, they were not familiar with idiomatic pairs and ordinary idioms, which account for a large number of idioms in English (Giang, 2018). Most comparative idioms have explicit component parts, which makes it easier for students to derive their idiomatic

meanings. However, idiomatic pairs and ordinary idioms puzzled students a lot since these idioms are mostly semi-opaque or opaque.

To improve the students' idiomatic competence, both teachers and students should realize the important role of idioms in the language learning process. Idioms can be taught in a number of ways, such as by providing an explanation or example of how to use a particular idiom in context; by discussing and analyzing the idiom; by taking it literally; by repeating and paraphrasing the idiom; by drawing on prior knowledge; by imagining a real-world scenario in which the expression could be used; by conducting a meta-analysis regarding the nature of idioms; by having a group discussion; by retelling and rephrasing (rather than just "repeating and paraphrasing"); and by interpreting individual words to determine the meaning of the phrase as a whole (Šarić, 2022). Furthermore, it is possible to translate idioms and compare them with their native-language counterparts. Students can be asked to match idioms with their definitions or be given multiple-choice questions with various meanings for an idiom to select the correct one. This is one way to determine if the students have learned a particular idiom. In addition, learners of foreign languages may be requested to insert idioms into phrases or substitute the idiom for the given meaning. In conclusion, more idioms should be included in instructional materials, focusing on their active usage, as learners can achieve native-like competence and increase their fluency, particularly in spoken language, by using prefabricated portions. Their significance should not be undervalued, since they provide foreign language learners with a way to convey intricate ideas in a condensed amount of words.

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