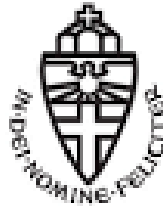


Are you going the limit or missing the point?

The effect of English expressions in English as a lingua franca

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Date: 08-06-20

Abstract

This study investigates the potential effects of the presence and respectively the absence of idiomatic language use in business related emails on the perceived comprehensibility of those emails and the perceived competence of the writer of those emails. Additionally, it is tested whether any effects can be found of whether the writer is a native or non-native speaker of English on the perceived comprehensibility and competence. The perceived comprehensibility and competence are evaluated by Dutch L2 speakers of English. This leads to the following research question and sub questions: “To what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting”; “To what extent do L2 speakers of English evaluate the presence of idiomatic expressions as making a text more comprehensible and the writer more competent than the absence of idiomatic expressions?”; “To what extent is there a difference in the effect of idioms on the evaluation of the text and speaker when the writer is assumed to be a non-native speaker compared to a native speaker?”.

These factors are investigated in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) setting. ELF settings occur more and more now that people have a more global focus in their lives, it is therefore highly relevant to investigate the factors that may contribute to a more effective ELF interaction. In an online questionnaire, participants are exposed to business emails that either do or do not involve idioms and that are or are not written by native speakers of English. They are then asked to evaluate the emails and their writers. No effect of either of the factors can be confirmed by this study. It is found that the presence of idioms might not influence the readers’ perception of comprehensibility of the text or competence of the writer as it does in spoken interaction.

Introduction

With the rise of globalisation, rises the need for a language that can be widely used in international settings. For effective communication between groups of different linguistic backgrounds to occur, a *lingua franca* is often used. Samarin (1987, p. 371) defines a *lingua franca* as: “any lingual medium of communication between people of different mother tongues”. A *lingua franca* is generally a natural language that is spoken beyond its native boundaries (Samarin, 1987, p. 371), but can also be a language that is invented for its purpose as a *lingua franca* such as Esperanto.

In recent years, English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) has been studied frequently (Crystal, 2012; Jenkins & Leung, 2017; Seidlhofer, 2005). Crystal (2012) explains why English currently seems to be the most successful *lingua franca*, based on the historical context, cultural foundation, and legacy. Jenkins and Leung (2017) mention that ELF has the largest number of English speakers worldwide, meaning that there is a larger number of non-native English speakers than native speakers of English. Seidlhofer (2005) mentions that, as approximately one out of four speakers of English has a mother tongue that is different from English, ELF interactions occur more frequently among solely non-native speakers of English than in situations where both native speakers and non-native speakers of English are involved.

Because ELF settings can involve both native and non-native speakers of English, there is a need for accommodation from both the native and the non-native speakers (Cogo, 2016), this means speakers aim to communicate in such a way that there is mutual understanding of the message. This suggests that grammar accurateness is often of less importance.

One way in which native speakers adapt their language use in ELF settings is by using fewer idioms or pairing the idiom that is used with the literal translation in English (Margic, 2017). Idiomatic language can be defined as: “linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent parts” (Kovecses & Szabco, 1996). Examples are ‘to kick the bucket’, meaning ‘to die’ or ‘to kill two birds with one stone’, meaning ‘to achieve two things by doing a single action’. Such idiomatic expressions are easily understood and used often by native speakers of English (Abel, 2003). However, as the meaning of such idiomatic expressions cannot literally be derived from the words in the expression, they are often harder to understand and use for non-native speakers, unless learners of English as a second language are trained intensively in the use of such expressions (Adkins, 1968).

Seeing that these idiomatic expressions are perceived to be highly important for effective communication by native speakers of English, and that English in an ELF setting is becoming more and more relevant, it is of interest to see whether the use of idioms has the same effect on non-native speakers of English. The question is whether these non-native speakers also perceive idiomatic expressions as an aspect of the English language that proves a speaker, native or non-native, is more proficient and fluent in the English language.

The next section of this paper will elaborate on the relevant topics of the study and the previous research performed on these topics, leading to the research question for this study.

Theoretical framework

The present study aims to find to what extent the presence of idioms influences the perceived comprehensibility of the text and perceived competence of the writer. The following section mentions previous studies on idioms that can be related to either the perceived comprehensibility or perceived competence.

As discussed in the introduction, idiomatic language use is important for the perceived proficiency by native speakers of English. However, idioms are generally an obstacle for second language learners of English (Adkins, 1968), even though they are an easy linguistic tool for native speakers to use (Abel, 2003). Margic, (2017), shows that native speakers of English recognize this issue for non-native speakers and therefore tend to avoid such idioms so as not to complicate the ELF communication for the non-native speakers. Native speakers of English thus see the obstacles idioms may bring for non-native speakers of English. This is supported by Franceschi (2013) who mentions that there are known disadvantages for non-native speakers in using idiomatic language, it may, for example, cause misunderstandings when used incorrectly, which could affect the perceived proficiency of the non-native speaker. In spite of this, Franceschi (2013) found that non-native speakers tend not to avoid idioms in cross-cultural communication, even though they seem to be aware of the markedness of the idiomatic language.

As mentioned previously, non-native speakers of English do not necessarily avoid the use of idioms in ELF communication. Seidlhofer (2009) found that non-native speakers use idiomatic language in the standard form of English as a native language (ENL), but may also use it in a creative way and create slightly different forms of the idiomatic language. This is in line with another finding by Seidlhofer (2009), implying that the use of English in an ELF situation varies strongly from the use of English in an ENL setting.

This is further explained in a study by Cogo (2016), who found that the goal of ELF communication is the mutual understanding of a message, rather than the correctness of the language, which is of more importance in an ENL setting. Seidlhofer (2009) found that ELF speakers generally use the English language on their own terms to find shared territory between the speakers in order to achieve a more effective way of communicating with one another. ELF speakers use English differently by, for instance, constructing phrases that are understandable for the ELF speakers but might not necessarily be in line with the expression in English as a native language (Seidlhofer, 2009). As ELF speakers do not necessarily follow the rules of English as a native language (Cogo, 2016; Franceschi, (2013); Seidlhofer, 2009)

one could argue that ELF speakers might not pay too much attention to the presence of idioms in a text, as long as the message that is conveyed is clear.

Although the use of idioms might not be of that much importance to ELF speakers as it is to native speakers of English, it has been found that both L1 and L2 speakers of English process these expressions quicker than literal phrasing (Cooper, 1999). Idiomatic expressions are part of a linguistic phenomenon called formulaic language, which are sequences of words that appear to be prefabricated and are stored in the mind as a whole, rather than as single words (Wray, 1999). This goes for both native and non-native speakers of English. This is supported by Carey (2013) who demonstrates that ELF speakers are capable of storing, organizing, and retrieving these prefabricated ‘chunks’ as single items, just like native English speakers are. This could imply that there might not be a strong effect of the presence of idiomatic language use on the perceived competence or comprehensibility by non-native evaluators of texts.

A study performed by Conklin and Schmitt (2008), in which they measured the time it takes someone to process certain phrases, demonstrates that formulaic sequences are generally processed quicker than nonformulaic sequences, and that this also goes for idiomatic sequences, by both native and non-native speakers of English. These findings suggest that idioms are not necessarily harder to understand than literal speech. Following this, one might also argue that the presence of such idioms in a text thus may not influence the comprehensibility of that text.

This section will now continue to discuss relevant research with regard to perceived competence of the writer. Ellis, Simpson-Vlach and Maynard (2008) found that formulaic sequences and idiomatic expressions are generally perceived as an essential concept for non-native speakers to study in order for them to become more competent and proficient in the English language. Their findings are based on a series of experiments regarding these sequences, for example reading and recognition tasks. The outcomes of this study suggest that the presence of idioms in a text may influence the perceived competence of the writer of the text, as Ellis, Simpson-Vlach and Maynard (2008) pointed out that the use of idiomatic expressions contributes to speakers being more competent in the English language. Findings from a small-scale experiment by Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006) support this suggestion. The experiment differentiated between two teaching methods, one emphasizing formulaic sequences, and one using a traditional grammar-lexis dichotomy. Afterwards, the students were judged by two blind judges. The outcomes show that non-native speakers of English who use formulaic sequences in their speech tend to come across

as more proficient and fluent speakers than speakers who avoid such formulaic language.

Studies have also been performed on the perceived competence of native versus non-native speakers of English in an ELF setting. In the following section several studies with regard to whether the writer is a native or a non-native speaker of English and its relationship with the perceived competence and comprehensibility will be discussed. The first study to mention is one by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) in which they assessed the perceptions of native and non-native speakers as teachers of English in an ELF setting. Their results showed a general preference for native speakers as teachers of English over non-native speakers, especially if students had previously been taught by a native speaker. Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) also found that the preference for a native speaker as a teacher of English increased as the level of education got higher. Participants especially preferred native speaker teachers with regard to their pronunciation and speaking skills, whereas vocabulary and culture were valued less.

Another study regarding the perception of native versus non-native speakers of English was performed in Turkey. The evaluation of native speakers as teachers of English versus non-native speakers as teachers of English was assessed (Üstünlüoğlu, 2007). Results showed that native speakers of English as teachers were generally rated higher on in-class communication skills and individual qualities than non-native speakers of English as teachers. The results from these two studies might indicate a general preference for native speakers of English in ELF situations, which could imply that native speakers might be perceived as more competent. However, these studies mostly involved spoken interaction, the preference for a native speaker might not be as strong when it comes to written interaction, as especially pronunciation and speaking skills were rated as being important, which are both factors that are not present in written interaction.

From the literature that was discussed previously one could conclude that although idiomatic language use is generally an obstacle for second language learners and ELF speakers, idioms can also be used creatively to the advantage of the ELF speaker in pursue of effective communication and mutual understanding in an ELF setting. This could imply that ELF speakers do not pay as much attention to idioms as native speakers, as long as the conveyed message remains clear.

However, idioms are processed equally fast by L1 and L2 speakers of English which may imply that the comprehensibility of a text might not be influenced by the presence or absence of idiomatic language.

With regard to perceived competence of the writer, formulaic sequences are perceived

as an essential concept to study in order to improve competence as a non-native speaker of English. In addition to that, non-native speakers of English who use formulaic sequences in their speech tend to come across as more proficient. Both of these studies could imply a higher perceived competence for the writers of the texts that include idiomatic language.

There is a general preference for native speakers of English in spoken ELF settings. This might or might not imply a preference for native speakers of English in written ELF as well, as the preference was mostly directed towards pronunciation and speaking skills.

Most of the aforementioned studies have focused on spoken ELF interactions, whereas written ELF interaction has received less attention throughout the studies, it would seem relevant to also explore the effects of idiomaticity on ELF written interactions, in order to gain a more complete perspective on the matter. Also, as seen in the reviewed studies, the preference for a native speaker lies mostly in oral skills, it would therefore be interesting to see whether the same preference occurs when only looking into written text as it does not involve the same factors that have to do with oral skills.

The present study aims to elaborate on the differences in perceived competence of writers that do include idiomatic language in their texts versus those who do not, and whether texts that include idiomatic language are more understandable than texts that do not include idiomatic language. In addition to that, the study aims to find whether there is also an effect of whether the writer is a native or non-native speaker on the perceived competence of the writer. This leads to the following research question accompanied by two sub-questions:

Research question: To what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgments of texts and speakers in an ELF setting?

Sub question 1: To what extent do L2 speakers of English evaluate the presence of idiomatic expressions as making a text more comprehensible and the writer more competent than the absence of idiomatic expressions?

Sub question 2: To what extent is there a difference in the effect of idioms on the evaluation of the text and speaker when the writer is assumed to be a non-native speaker compared to a native speaker?

Methodology

Materials

In this experiment the participants were exposed to 4 different texts written in English. The texts were presented as business related e-mails to a multinational team in which English is used as the main language of communication. The topics of the e-mails varied so as to not raise suspicion among the participants of the experiment about the subject of the investigation.

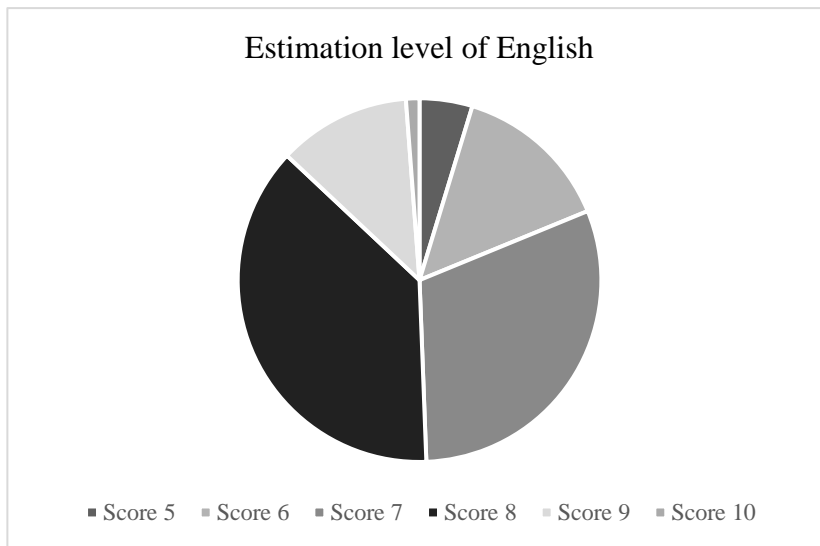
Each text was about ten lines, this way there was enough room for idioms to be included, and the texts did not take up too much of the participants' time to read. For the condition including the use of idiomatic language, five idioms were added to each text. The idioms that were used have been selected from the database of Beck and Weber (2016). The only criterium that was used for the selection of the idioms was based on the familiarity ratings by native speakers of English, which was included in the database. All idioms involved in this study have a familiarity rating of 6 or higher. From these idioms with a rating of 6 or above, the idioms were selected randomly. Each text had two versions, one with idioms and one without. To keep the two texts as similar as possible, the idioms were translated to a literal phrase that had approximately the same amount of words as the idiom and would not change the structure of the sentence the idiom was part of. The texts were constructed by Dutch non-native speakers of English and were checked by two Canadian native speakers of English.

Subjects

A total of 85 people participated in this study. All participants indicated their gender as either male or female, 56.5 % of participants was female (48). The mode for age was 21.0 years, the median was 22.0 and the mean age was 22.06 ($SD = 2.09$). The mean is not entirely accurate, as participants over thirty years of age could not fill out their exact age, instead they had to select the option 'older than 30' for age (8.2%).

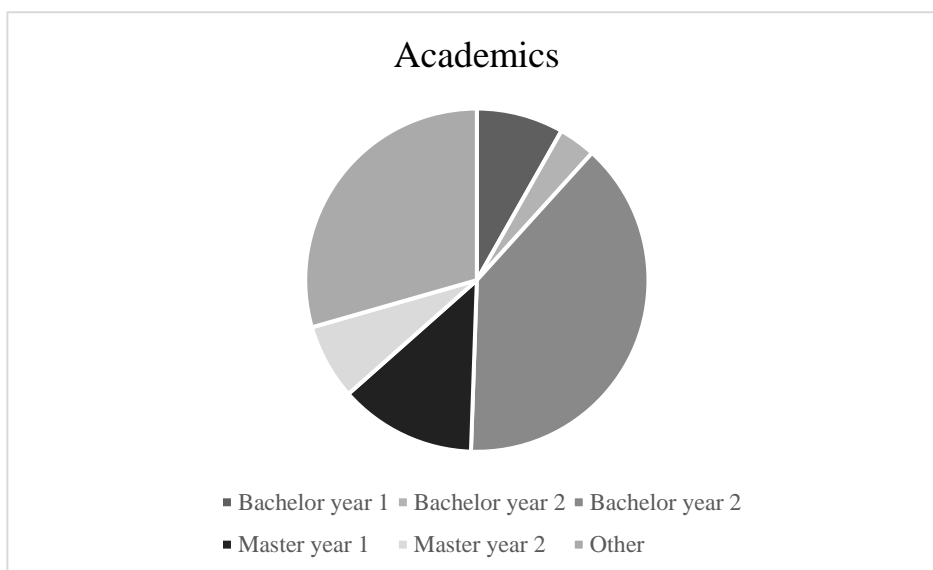
Participants were asked to estimate their levels of English on a scale from one to ten. The mean estimation was 7.41 ($SD = 1.06$), with answers ranging from 5 being the lowest to 10 being the highest. A pie chart is included below in Figure 1 to clarify the estimation of the participants.

Figure 1.



Participants were also asked about their current academic status. The first question was whether or not participants are currently enrolled in an English taught programme. 56.5 % said they were not currently enrolled in an English taught programme (48). The second question was about the current academic year the participants are enrolled in. More than a third of the participants, 38.8 %, is currently enrolled in the third year of their academic bachelor's degree (33). The frequency of other selected options is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2.



In addition to the participants' estimation of their level of English, they were asked to perform a LexTALE (Lexical Test for Advanced Learners of English) (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012) vocabulary test at the end of the experiment. This test took about 3.5 minutes to complete and has been designed especially for cognitive researchers studying participants with an advanced level of English (Lextale.com). This method is generally preferred over the use of self-ratings as Lemhöfer and Broersma (2012) have shown that LexTALE was a more accurate predictor of proficiency than self-ratings. Participants with a lower proficiency in English were not excluded from the experiment. However, a LexTALE score higher than 80 was used as a criterium for the second set of two-way ANOVAs, to see whether an effect was present when only the results of the most proficient participants were used. This selection is based on findings from previous research that native speakers tend to value the use of idioms and will evaluate the speaker as more proficient when using idiomatic language (Boers et al., 2006). The assumption was made that more proficient non-native speakers could be more likely to evaluate the use of idioms the same way as native speakers than the less proficient non-native speakers.

Only Dutch people were accepted as participants of this experiment. This way it was not necessary to look into overlap in idioms between English and the languages of other participants, only into the overlap between Dutch and English.

Factors like age and level of education were not used as selection criteria for the participants but were taken into account and this information was collected from the participants in the first section of the questionnaire.

Design

The design of this study was 2 x 2, as there were two independent variables, namely: native/non-native writer of the text and idiomaticity of the text, that each have two levels. The levels of native/non-native writer are 1) the writer is a native speaker of English and 2) the writer is a non-native speaker of English. The levels of idiomaticity are 1) idioms are included in the text and 2) idioms are not included in the text. Therefore, the different conditions the participants were exposed to are as follows:

1. The text is written by a native speaker and does not include idiomatic language use
2. The text is written by a non-native speaker and does not include idiomatic language use
3. The text is written by a native speaker and does include idiomatic language use

4. The text is written by a non-native speaker and does include idiomatic language use.

For this experiment, a between-subject design was used. As mentioned before, each participant was exposed to one of four conditions four times, i.e. they read 4 different texts, all belonging to the same condition. There were 2 versions of each text, one with idioms and one without. The effect of native/non-native speaker of English as writer was manipulated by changing the name of the writer to an English or Dutch one (e.g. Anne Miller or Anne van den Boogaard). To cancel out potential effects of the country of origin of the writers of the texts, the linguistic background of the writers was either Dutch or English, no other countries of origin were used. To emphasize that the writer was either a native or a non-native speaker, this was additionally mentioned explicitly in the instructions of the experiment. All versions of the texts can be found in Appendix 1.

Instruments

There were two dependent variables in this experiment: comprehensibility and competence. The first variable, comprehensibility, was operationalised by asking the participant questions about the text itself. This was done by providing three statements followed by a five-point semantic differential scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (2). The participant was asked to rate the following three statements on the semantic differential scale:

1. The email is easy to read
2. It is clear what the email is about
3. I understood the email

The second dependent variable, competence, was measured on three five-point semantic differential scales, based on Nejari (2020), asking the participants their opinion about the writer of the text, based on what they read. The scales that were used are: proficient (5) - not proficient (1), professional (5) – unprofessional (1), educated (5) – uneducated (1). On the top of the page the question ‘please rate “name of writer” on the following traits:’ followed by each trait on a semantic differential scale. All experiment questions and scales can be found in Appendix 4.

To test the reliability of each measured variable a Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for both comprehensibility and competence. The reliability of ‘comprehensibility’, comprised of 3 items was acceptable: $\alpha = .85$. Consequently, the mean of the items was used to calculate the compound variable ‘comprehensibility’, which was used in further analyses. The reliability of ‘competence’, comprised of 3 items was acceptable: $\alpha = .89$. Consequently, the

mean of the items was used to calculate the compound variable 'competence, which was used in further analyses.

Procedure

The experiment was performed by means of an online questionnaire using Qualtrics (Qualtrics XM). Participants were recruited by spreading the questionnaire on social media and via e-mail. As the questionnaire was performed online, the participation was individual. The participants were not briefed about the aim of the research beforehand, nor were they be made aware of the dependent variables that were tested before the questionnaire. They only received instructions for the questionnaire and a word of gratitude from the researchers beforehand. After their participation they were shortly briefed about the aim of the study they participated in. Instructions and debriefing can be found in Appendix 2.

The procedure was the same for each participant, however, they were all exposed to different versions of the emails belonging to one of the conditions. The procedure consisted of three parts. The first part was a list with several general questions about the age, gender, level of education etc. These questions can be found in Appendix 3. In this part they also read the terms and conditions for the study and they provided their informed consent for their participation, participants under 17 or participants that did not provide their informed consent were immediately redirected to the end of the survey. The second part was the experiment, in which they got presented with a text to read, followed by the six questions, 4 times. After the evaluation of all the texts, the participants were asked to participate in a LexTALE vocabulary test as mentioned before. The instructions and words for the LexTALE can be found in Appendix 5. The time participants needed to complete the entire experiment varied strongly. There were a few extreme outliers which have influenced the mean strongly, therefore, 2 participants who took longer than 3000 seconds (50 minutes) were not included in the calculation of the mean duration (these participants are included in the results). The median was 602 seconds (10.03 minutes), the mode was 348 seconds (5.8 minutes) and $M = 758.10$ (12.64 minutes), $SD = 545.15$ (9.09 minutes).

Statistical treatment

To assess the significant main effects produced by the manipulation of the independent variables two two-way ANOVA were carried out. The independent variables that were tested were idiomaticity of the text and native/non-native writer of the text. The dependent variables

in this analysis were level of perceived competence and level of comprehensibility. One two-way ANOVA was carried out to analyse the dependent variable comprehensibility testing the main effects of the two independent variables and their interaction effect. The other two-way ANOVA was carried out to analyse the dependent variable competence testing the main effects of the two independent variables and their interaction effect. The two two-way ANOVAs were carried out again analysing only the results from participants with a LexTALE score over 80.

Results

The data from 85 participants was used in the analyses of this study. two participants from the original dataset have been excluded from the analyses, based on the fact that their mother tongue was not Dutch.

In Table 1 below the means and standard deviations for the variables comprehensibility and competence are presented. The mean values are composed of the 3 items (questions) that build up the variables competence or comprehensibility.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for the comprehensibility of the texts and competence of the writers in function of idiomaticity and native/non-native writer

(1 = very low comprehensibility / competence, 5 = very high comprehensibility / competence)

	Idioms		No idioms	
	Native	Non-Native	Native	Non-Native
	n = 26	n = 21	n = 18	n = 20
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Comprehensibility	4.38 (.58)	4.25 (.56)	4.39 (.49)	4.45 (.31)
Competence	3.55 (.70)	3.54 (.60)	3.66 (.45)	3.77 (.44)

A two-way analysis of variance with presence of idioms in the text (idiomaticity) and whether or not the writer was a native speaker of English (writer) as factors did not show a significant main effect of presence of idioms on the perceived comprehensibility of the text ($F(1,81) = 1.04, p = .310$). Texts with idioms ($M = 4.32, SD = .57$) were perceived to be equally

comprehensible as texts without idioms ($M = 4.43, SD = .40$). The analysis also did not show a significant main effect of whether or not the writer of the text was a native speaker of English on the comprehensibility of the text ($F(1,81) < 1$). Texts written by a native speaker of English ($M = 4.38, SD = .54$) were perceived to be equally comprehensible as texts written by a non-native speaker of English ($M = 4.35, SD = .47$). The interaction effect between the factors ‘idioms’ and ‘writer’ was not statistically significant ($F(1,81) < 1$). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Output two-way ANOVA comprehensibility

	df	F	Sig.
Corrected model	3	.615	.607
Intercept	1	6203.52	.000
Idiomacity	1	1.044	.310
Writer	1	.095	.759
Idiomacity*writer	1	.731	.395
Error	81		
Total	85		
Corrected total	84		

A two-way analysis of variance with presence of idioms in the text (idiomacity) and whether or not the writer was a native speaker of English (writer) as factors did not show a significant main effect of presence of idioms on the perceived competence of the writer ($F(1,81) = 1.77, p = .188$). Writers of the texts with idioms ($M = 3.55, SD = .65$) were perceived to be equally competent as writers of texts without idioms ($M = 3.71, SD = .44$). The analysis also did not show a significant main effect of whether or not the writer of the text was a native speaker of English on the perceived competence of the writer ($F(1,81) < 1$). Native speakers of English ($M = 3.59, SD = .60$) were perceived to be equally competent as non-native speakers of English ($M = 3.65, SD = .54$). The interaction effect between the factors ‘idioms’ and ‘writer’ was not statistically significant ($F(1,81) < 1$). The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Output two-way ANOVA competence

	df	F	Sig.
Corrected model	3	.727	.539
Intercept	1	3367.37	.000
Idiomatycity	1	.576	.188
Writer	1	.057	.676
Idiomatycity*writer	1	.207	.651
Error	81		
Total	85		
Corrected total	84		

As the previous two-way analyses of variance did not show significant main effects of ‘idiomaticity’ or ‘writer’, a follow up analysis was performed with only the participants of the study who were most proficient in English. This was done to assess whether participants with a higher proficiency in English, those who are closer to a native speaker level of English, would pay more attention to the use of idioms in the emails or the linguistic background of the writer. The aim was to see whether the variables ‘idiomaticity’ or ‘writer’ would then influence the perceived comprehensibility and competence more strongly than when all participants were included in the analysis. These participants were selected based on their LexTALE score. LexTALE scores ranged from 48.75 to 100 ($M = 79.25$, $SD = 12.24$), the median was 80. The following analyses include only participants with LexTALE scores higher than 80 (41 participants). In Table 4 below the means and standard deviations for the variables comprehensibility and competence are presented. The mean values are composed of the 3 items (questions) that build up the variables competence or comprehensibility.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations for the comprehensibility of the text and competence the writer in function of idiomaticity and native/non-native writer including the participants with a LexTALE score higher than 80

(1 = very low comprehensibility / competence, 5 = very high comprehensibility / competence)

	Idioms		No idioms	
	Native n = 13 <i>M (SD)</i>	Non-Native n = 6 <i>M (SD)</i>	Native n = 11 <i>M (SD)</i>	Non-Native n = 11 <i>M (SD)</i>
Comprehensibility	4.55 (.37)	4.51 (.42)	4.47 (.42)	4.52 (.27)
Competence	3.97 (.61)	3.60 (.65)	3.58 (.45)	3.86 (.33)

A two-way analysis of variance with presence of idioms in the text (idiomaticity) and whether or not the writer was a native speaker of English (writer) as factors did not show a significant main effect of presence of idioms on the perceived comprehensibility of the text ($F(1,37) < 1$). Texts with idioms ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .37$) were perceived to be equally comprehensible as texts without idioms ($M = 4.49$, $SD = .34$). The analysis also did not show a significant main effect of whether or not the writer of the text was a native speaker of English on the comprehensibility of the text ($F(1,37) < 1$). Texts written by a native speaker of English ($M = 4.52$, $SD = .39$) were perceived to be equally comprehensible as texts written by a non-native speaker of English ($M = 4.51$, $SD = .31$). The interaction effect between the factors ‘idioms’

and ‘writer’ was not statistically significant ($F(1,37) < 1$). The results are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Output two-way ANOVA comprehensibility for LexTALE scores higher than 80

	df	F	Sig.
Corrected model	3	.114	.951
Intercept	1	5688.90	.000
Idiomatichity	1	.131	.719
Writer	1	.000	.995
Idiomatichity*writer	1	.139	.711
Error	37		
Total	41		
Corrected total	40		

A two-way analysis of variance with presence of idioms in the text (idiomaticity) and whether or not the writer was a native speaker of English (writer) as factors did not show a significant main effect of presence of idioms on the perceived competence of the writer ($F(1,37) < 1$). Writers of the texts with idioms ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .63$) were perceived to be equally competent as writers of texts without idioms ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .41$). The analysis also did not show a significant main effect of whether or not the writer of the text was a native speaker of English on the perceived competence of the writer ($F(1,37) < 1$). Native speakers of English ($M = 3.79$, $SD = .57$) were perceived to be equally competent as non-native speakers of English ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .47$). The interaction effect between the factors ‘idioms’ and ‘writer’ was not statistically significant ($F(1,81) = 3.70$, $p = .062$). The results are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Output two-way ANOVA competence for LexTALE scores higher than 80

	df	F	Sig.
Corrected model	3	1.457	.242
Intercept	1	2013.95	.000
Idiomatichity	1	.142	.709

Writer	1	.086	.771
Idiomacity*writer	1	3.704	.062
Error	37		
Total	41		
Corrected total	40		

The present study has not shown a significant effect of the presence of idiomatic expressions in texts on the perceived comprehensibility of that text, nor on the perceived competence of the writer of that text (sub question 1). The present study also did not show a significant effect of whether or not the writer was assumed to be native or non-native on the perceived comprehensibility of that text, nor on the perceived competence of the writer of that text (sub question 2).

Discussion

As the results section shows, there were no significant results found that can explicitly answer the research questions from this study. A significant effect was not found of the presence of idiomatic expressions in texts on the perceived comprehensibility of that text, nor on the perceived competence of the writer of that text (sub question 1). The present study also did not show a significant effect of whether or not the writer was assumed to be native or non-native on the perceived comprehensibility of that text, nor on the perceived competence of the writer of that text (sub question 2).

As all outcomes from the analyses were insignificant, it is complicated to interpret the meaning of these results. The outcomes could mean that neither the presence of idioms, nor the fact that a writer is native/non-native has any effects on the perceived comprehensibility of the text and perceived competence of the writer. This interpretation is unlikely, as previous research has often shown that an effect of either of these factors does exist. An example of such a study is the one performed by Boers et al. (2006). Their findings show that non-native speakers of English who are capable of using idiomatic language in their speech tend to come across as more fluent and proficient than those who avoid it. In addition to that, Ellis et al. (2008) pointed out that speakers who use idiomatic language are generally more competent in the English language.

A study that may support the findings of the present study is the one by Conklin and Schmitt (2008), in which is demonstrated that both native and non-native speakers of English process idioms equally easily as literal speech. This suggests texts with idioms should not necessarily be harder to understand than texts with literal phrases. Their findings would suggest that the presence or absence of idioms in texts may not influence the comprehensibility of the text. This is in line with the present study not confirming an effect of the presence of idioms in a text on the perceived comprehensibility.

With regard to whether the writer was a native or non-native speaker of English, studies like the one performed by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) show that there is generally a preference for native speakers of English in ELF situations. This would suggest that the native speakers from this study would be perceived to be more competent than the non-native speakers. This was not confirmed in the present study. However, the study by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) was focused on oral communication rather than written communication. When looking at their results one could argue that native speakers might be preferred with regard to spoken interaction, but that this preference might not be as strong when it comes to

written interaction.

A factor that might have caused the results of the present study to differ from those of previous studies is that this study only includes L2 speakers of English as participants, more specifically only participants with Dutch as their mother tongue. Previous studies have generally focused on L1 speakers of English as evaluators, whereas this study has focused on L2 speakers as evaluators. It could be argued that L1 speakers of English evaluate ELF communication and the use of idioms in ELF differently. It would be interesting to perform a follow up study that involves both L1 and L2 speakers of English to be able to compare their evaluations. Another option would be to include L2 speakers of English from several nationalities to see whether there could be a difference depending on one's nationality. It is possible that in different cultures the use of idiomatic language or a native/non-native writer might be perceived differently. These findings could benefit the view on both intercultural communication and ELF interaction.

Limitations of the research may have influenced the outcomes to not be similar to previous research. A limitation of this study lies in constructing the texts that were used to assess the perceived competence and comprehensibility. The emails that were used were constructed by four different people, all Dutch non-native speakers of English, with idioms picked quite randomly from the database of Beck and Weber (2016). Each email was written by one person, then checked by the others and eventually checked once more by two native speakers of English. In addition to that, the companies, names, and subjects of the emails were all fictitious, which could have influenced the reliability of the emails as perceived by the participants. This limitation was unavoidable for the present study, but could be taken into account when reperforming this study or performing a study resembling this one.

Another limitation of this study is the fact that the ELF setting was only present in the emails, and did not actively include the participants. The emails were explained to be a part of an ELF communication within a multinational team of a company. However, the participants were not necessarily ELF communicators, they were Dutch speakers of English. The participants might have experience in ELF communication, or might not. For further research it would be interesting to select participants that work in an international environment and are familiar with ELF communication.

As mentioned earlier on in this discussion and in the theoretical framework most previous studies regarding the subject of this research have been focussed on spoken ELF interaction rather than written interaction. It could be suggested that the effect of these factors is stronger in spoken interaction than in written interaction. However, it could also be that the

subject of written interaction has simply been elaborated on less and is a subject that requires more in depth research to gain a better understanding of the matter. To add to the theories on the use of idiomatic language and on the effect of a native/non-native speaker in ELF interaction it could be useful to perform a study similar to this one and to compare it to a similar study on spoken interaction. This way the gap between these types of interactions can be assessed and analysed in order to get a clearer view on what aspects of language and speaker are important or less important in ELF interaction.

Conclusion

In this study no effect was found of the presence or absence of idioms in a text on the perceived comprehensibility of the text or perceived competence of the writer. Neither can it be confirmed that whether the writer of the text is a native speaker of English or a non-native speaker of English has an effect on the perceived comprehensibility of the text or the perceived competence of the writer, as assessed by Dutch L2 speakers of English. That no effects have been found in this study does not mean that there is no effect of either of the factors. It could mean that the design needs to be adapted in order to measure the effect correctly or that it may be necessary to study the factors separately or in combination with other aspects of the English language to be able to analyse them and their effects more extensively.

The current study has provided some insights on the evaluation of the written interaction among ELF speakers, rather than spoken interaction. It was found that the presence of idioms might not necessarily influence the readers' perception of comprehensibility of the text or competence of the writer. It was also found that for written interaction in ELF readers might not necessarily prefer a native writer over a non-native writer. The insights mainly revolve around the further exploration of the subject of ELF written interaction. This is an aspect of ELF that could be elaborated on broadly, in the light of what aspects of the English language are especially important in ELF written interaction as opposed to in spoken interaction and which aspects are of less importance for effective ELF written interaction. By researching this aspect of ELF communication further, a better understanding of ELF and effective ELF communication can be acquired. Effective ELF interaction is highly important as our society has quickly developed from a locally focussed society to a globally focussed society in the last decades.

Both the difference between native and non-native speakers in ELF interaction and the

use of idiomatic language in ELF interaction remain subjects that are relevant to study in the future to improve scientist's insights in effective ELF interaction.

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