

Best of both worlds? The influence of idiomatic expressions in an ELF setting

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## Abstract

The use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is becoming more and more important considering the growth of multinational organisations and expanding cultural diversity in Universities. The English language is seen as the global lingua franca and is the most used language for scientific articles, international trade, education and books (Parupalli, 2019). In addition, idiomatic expressions exist in every language and are a central aspect of language. The purpose of this study was to discover whether idiomatic expressions and the native language of a speaker influence how texts and speakers are judged in an ELF setting. The main research question was therefore: “*to what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgments of texts and speakers in an ELF setting?*” ELF is very important to study, since English is the global language of academia and it is spoken more by non-native than by native speakers (Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2010). Furthermore, idioms are also interesting to investigate, because they are a central aspect of language and its understanding (Seidlhofer, 2009). In this experiment, 85 native Dutch speakers had to evaluate four English emails each regarding the comprehensibility and competence of the writers and the emails. The results indicated that idiomatic expressions did not influence the judgments of texts and speakers in an ELF setting. Furthermore, there was no difference in evaluation of the text and speaker when the writer was assumed to be a non-native speaker and when the writer was assumed to be a native speaker. The results illustrate that more research is needed on the written and oral evaluation of speakers and writers who use idiomatic expressions in an ELF setting.

## Introduction

The use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has become a growing field of research with the rise of multinational organisations and expanding cultural diversity in Universities. The English language is considered as the first worldwide lingua franca and is the most extensively used language for scientific articles, international trade, education and books (Parupalli, 2019). A lingua franca can be defined as a language that is mainly used by non-native speakers (Hendriks, Van Meurs, & De Groot, 2017). Moreover, ELF can be defined as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p.7). English, the global language of academia, is spoken more by non-native speakers than by native speakers (Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2010), which highlights its importance as a lingua franca. On the other hand, effective communication in ELF might not always be easy and

sufficient writing and discourse skills are important in order to understand the persons with whom one is communicating.

In an ELF situation, both speakers are non-native speakers of English. Idioms can make it challenging for non-native speakers to understand a language. In addition, idioms can be seen as a central aspect of language and are abundant in daily speech. Weinreich (1969, p.47) defined an idiom or idiomatic expression as “a complex expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements”. This means that the meaning of the words combined is different from the sum of the meaning of the individual words. Idioms do not exist in isolation, but rather in discourse. Wood (2006) discussed the term *formulaic sequence*. This term does not only cover idioms, but also collocations (e.g. saving time), binomials (e.g. rock and roll), lexical bundles (e.g. as a result of) and speech formulae. Wood (2006, p.13) defined a formulaic sequence as “a fixed combination of words that have a range of functions and uses in speech production and communication, and seem to be cognitively stored and retrieved by speakers as if they were single words”. Idioms are integrated in a language to such a degree that one might not notice that a certain word combination is an idiom (Mäntylä, 2004). Idioms exist in every language and different types of idioms can occur in terms of compositionality, translation and mobility. Although idioms in an ELF context are important topics because of the indispensability of idioms and the growth of ELF, idioms have not been studied extensively in combination with ELF.

However, there are many studies on idioms alone. A branch of research focuses on the question of how idioms are processed. A general picture that emerges from this is that the use of idioms is advantageous for the listener because idiomatic language is processed faster mentally than non-idiomatic language (Swinney & Cutler (1979). In this study, participants had to determine whether certain random word strings were acceptable English phrases and their reaction times were measured. Classification times were quicker for idioms than for control phrases. They stated that idioms were stored in a special list that is not part of the normal lexicon. They also mentioned that their results supported the lexical representation hypothesis. This model stresses that an idiomatic expression is arbitrary concerning its component elements. Idioms are mentally stored as long complex words, due to their absence of semantic compositionality. In addition, computing the literal meaning of an expression would take more time than retrieving the idiomatic meaning of an expression. The research by Pawley and Syder (1983) supported the fact that idiomatic language is stored differently in the mind than non-idiomatic language. They showed that formulaic sequences were processed as a unit and they are therefore processed faster and more easily than non-formulaic

sequences. Prefabricated strings of language, such as idioms, are stored in the mind, more specifically in the long-term memory. In language production, these strings of language can be used 'ready-made', because they are retrieved as a whole from the mind. Later studies confirmed the idea that idioms are processed faster (Jiang & Nekrasova, 2007; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). These later studies by Jiang and Nekrasova (2007) and Conklin and Schmitt (2008) showed that this processing advantage appears to be in place for both L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) speakers. What we can conclude from these studies about the processing of idioms is that idioms are an important aspect of a language and can give L1 and L2 learners an advantage. That is to say, idioms are read faster and they are quickly to understand in context.

According to the previous studies (Swinney & Cutler 1979; Pawley, & Syder, 1983; Jiang, & Nekrasova, 2007; Conklin, & Schmitt, 2008), an advantage of idioms is that they are processed faster than non-idiomatic language, because they are processed as a unit. Another advantage of using idiomatic expressions is that it can help language learners come across as more proficient. Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006) showed that participants who used idioms were perceived as more proficient than participants who did not use idioms. L2 learners of English had to study the English language for this experiment. In one group, the focus was on formulaic sequences and in the other group, the focus was on grammar and vocabulary. Two blind judges, who were both unaware of the goal of the experiment, evaluated both groups on their conversational skills. The group that was taught formulaic sequences used more idioms and was evaluated as more proficient and fluent than the control group. In this study, only the oral proficiency of the participants that used idioms was judged. Whether this advantage would still be in place when the participant's written proficiency was judged, was not tested.

This previous study by Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006) only investigated the judgments on L2 speakers of English, but it might also be interesting to look at whether L1 speakers and L2 speakers of English are judged differently. The study by Al-Hoorie (2016) also studied the judgments of L2 learners of English, but he did not study idioms. The author investigated the attitude of L2 speakers of English towards native English speakers and non-native English speakers. He wanted to know what the implicit and explicit attitudes were of Arabic L1 speakers towards other English L2 speakers. Greenwald and Banaji (1995, p.8) defined *implicit attitudes* as "introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate a favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action towards social objects". Results showed that the L1 participants were slightly more

inclined towards their L1 group, which means that their implicit attitude was more positive towards speakers of their native language than towards L2 speakers of English. The results concerning the explicit attitudes however, showed that participants were generally positive towards L2 speakers of English. Thus, there is research on the judgments on L1 and L2 speakers of English and on the judgments on L2 speakers that use idioms, but not on the judgments of non-native English speakers on native and non-native English speakers that use idioms. Perhaps L1 and L2 speakers of English might be judged differently when using idioms.

Research on the use of idioms by non-native speakers is growing, but not much research has yet focused on idioms in an ELF setting. Research on the use of idiomatic expressions by L2 English speakers is also relevant when studying idioms in an ELF setting because in both cases, participants are non-native speakers of English. The effect of using idioms on the assessment of the L2 speaker could be different if the addressee is also an L2 speaker. A study on the comprehension of idioms in an ELF setting is done by Cooper (1999). Cooper (1999) studied the use of idiomatic expressions in combination with English as a second language and concluded that communicating in a second language can be difficult if one is not familiar with idioms. He looked at how English L2 speakers use online processing strategies to define the meaning of idioms in a written context. The results showed that most participants used a heuristic approach to the understanding of idioms. Cooper explained that the term *heuristic* involves that “learners are encouraged to learn, discover, understand, or solve problems on their own by experimenting, by evaluating possible answers or solutions, or through trial and error” (Cooper, 1999, p.255). L2 learners tended to use this approach more often than L1 speakers did. He stated that idiomatic expressions could be an obstacle for second language learners, even though it is an important part for the understanding of a language. Not understanding idioms could lead to misunderstandings between L2-L1 and L2-L2 speakers. Laufer (2000) also looked at L2 speakers’ comprehension of idiomatic expressions. She studied whether the degree of L1-L2 similarity had an effect on the avoidance of idioms. The native Hebrew participants were asked to fill in a blank with an English expression. Next to the blank, the Hebrew expression, that they had to translate to English, was provided. The second test was a passive knowledge test, for which the participants had to translate English expressions to Hebrew. The results showed that in the first test, idiomatic expressions were not avoided, whereas in the second test, there was an effect of degree of L1-L2 similarity on the use of idiomatic expressions. Idioms that were translatable were used more often than idioms that did not exist in Hebrew. Lastly, the results

showed that language proficiency affected the avoidance of certain idioms. Participants that were more advanced in English used more expressions than participants that were less advanced. The author concluded that idiomatic expressions are not a problem to the advanced L2 learners, since idioms are generally taught by teachers to students at high levels of English and not when students just start to learn English. Different degrees of L1-L2 similarity may have different effects on avoidance. Lastly, the study of Ellis, Simpson-Vlach and Maynard (2008) showed that different aspects of formulaicity influence the accuracy and fluency of processing formulaic expressions of native speakers and L2 speakers of English. They stated that no matter how long the L2 learners studied English, the processing of formulaic expressions remained different from the processing of formulaic expressions of the native English speakers. The processing of the advanced English learners was influenced by how many formulaic expressions they read and the processing of native speakers was influenced by mutual information. Ellis et al. (2008, p.379) defined mutual information as “a statistical measure commonly used in the field of information science designed to assess the degree to which the words in a phrase occur together more often than would be expected by chance”.

Overall, prior research has shown that using idiomatic expressions can give speakers advantages. Idioms are read and processed faster and it can help language learners to come across as proficient. However, idioms can be an obstacle for second language learners. Moreover, interactions in an ELF setting can lead to miscommunication when using idiomatic expressions, since they do not have shared cultural knowledge for example.

In the study by Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006) L2 speakers of English are judged as more proficient when using idiomatic language than when not using idiomatic language. However, only the oral proficiency of the participants was judged. Written proficiency is also part of one’s language skills, which makes it interesting to look at. Moreover, there is research on the judgments on L1 and L2 speakers of English in an ELF setting (Al-Hoorie, 2016) and on the judgments on L2 speakers that use idioms (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer, 2006), but not on these combined. L2 speakers of English might judge L1 and L2 speakers of English differently when idioms are used, due to implicit and explicit attitudes for example (Al-Hoorie, 2016). Furthermore, Cooper (1999) discussed that idioms can be a factor that makes understanding a language more difficult, but Laufer (2000) showed that idiomatic expressions are not a problem to advanced second language learners. It might therefore be interesting to investigate whether a text with idioms is easier or more difficult to understand than a text without idioms by advanced second language speakers. To know whether second language speakers are still

more comprehensible and seen as more proficient when using idioms can be very useful in everyday situations, such as in job interviews.

The focus of this research is on the influence of idiomatic expressions and the judgments of texts and speakers in an ELF setting. ELF is very important to study, since English is the global language of academia and it is spoken more by non-native than by native speakers (Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2010). Furthermore, idioms are also interesting to investigate, because they are a central aspect of language and contribute to the understanding of a language (Seidlhofer, 2009).

Hence, there is one general research question: *To what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgments of texts and speakers in an ELF setting?*. Moreover, there are two sub questions:

1. *To what extent do L2 speakers of English evaluate the use of idiomatic expressions as making a text more comprehensible and the writer more competent than the absence of idiomatic expressions?*
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?*

The outcome of this study could help other future research on ELF and idiomatic expressions in a written context, since there is not much research on these topics combined yet. The results of this study will show whether idioms influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting and to what extent. Second language speakers in an ELF context will know whether it is useful to use idioms regarding comprehension and L1 and L2 speakers of English will know whether using idioms influences how L2 speakers of English evaluate them.

## Method

### Materials

The independent variables in this study were idiomaticity (idioms vs. no idioms) and writer (native vs. non-native). For this research, 16 English emails with different everyday topics were used. The full emails are included in the appendix. All of the emails were created by non-native writers of English. In total eight emails were created: four emails with idioms and four emails without idioms. Eight of those emails had a sender with a Dutch name and

eight had a sender with an English name, so there were in total 16 different emails. The topics of the emails were a business trip, a monthly meeting scheduling, organizational change and a new office on a different location. Two of the four conditions contained emails with five idiomatic expressions per email. The emails were constructed especially for this experiment and consisted of approximately ten lines. The idiomatic expressions that were used came from the English-German Database of Idiom Norms (Beck & Weber, 2016). In this database, there was a column with the familiarity rating rated by native speakers and non-native speakers of English. The idioms that we selected were idioms with a familiarity rating higher than six, rated by native speakers of English. The expressions were common and everyday expressions. The reason for this was to avoid that the participants would consciously notice the idioms and would guess the goal of the study. In addition, each idiom was only used once. The emails of the L2 speakers had a sender with a Dutch name, such as Anne van den Boogaard, Joyce de Jong, Oscar Groen and Tim Jansen. The emails of the native speakers were signed by English names, such as Anne Miller, Joyce McGee, Oscar Hughes and Tim Johnson. The emails that were supposed to be written by a native English speaker had a sender with an English name to make it more believable that a native speaker wrote it. Moreover, the emails that were supposed to be written by a non-native speaker had a sender with a Dutch name to make it more believable that a non-native speaker wrote it. The nativeness of the writers of the emails was mentioned in the explanatory text before the experiment began.

## Subjects

The participants of this study were 85 native Dutch speakers. The selection criteria were that the participants had a Dutch nationality and that they had an advanced English level. There were 48 females and 37 males that took part in this experiment. Participants had a mean age of 22.1 years ( $SD = 2.09$ ; range = 18-29). The mean duration of the questionnaire was 3753 seconds ( $SD = 15878$ ; range = 183-112627). Table 1 shows the academic year of the students. To be sure that the participants had the same level of English, they had to estimate their level of English on a scale from one to ten and they had to perform a language test called LexTALE (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012). The mean estimation of the level of English was 7.4 ( $SD = 1.06$ ; range = 5-10). Furthermore, the mean score of the language test was 79.3 ( $SD = 12.24$ ; range = 48.75 - 100). The score of this test was on a scale of 1 to 100.

Table 1. The academic year in function of the frequency and the percentages (between brackets) of the participants.

	Frequency of the participants (percentage)
Bachelor 1	7 (8.2)
Bachelor 2	3 (3.5)
Bachelor 3	33 (38.8)
Master 1	11 (12.9)
Master 2	6 (7.1)
Other	25 (29.4)
Total	85 (100)

## Design

A 2x2 between-subjects design was used, because there were two independent variables (writer and idiomaticity) that both had two levels (native writer vs. non-native writer and idiomatic language vs. non-idiomatic language), resulting in four conditions. There were four different emails per condition and there were in total sixteen different emails. It was decided that the respondents were exposed to only one condition, because the experiment would have taken them too much time otherwise.

## Instruments

To operationalise the dependent variables, comprehensibility of the text and the competence of the writer were measured. These measurements were based on the measurements in the study of Nejjari (2020), who also measured, among other things, the responses concerning competence with ‘educated-uneducated’. To measure the comprehensibility of the text, the participants had to answer three questions: is the email easy to read? Is the email clear? Did you understand the email? Their response was measured on a 7-point Likert scale with ‘strongly disagree’ on one end and ‘strongly disagree’ on the other end. To measure the competence/attitude of the writer of the text, the participants had to judge the professionalism, the education and the proficiency of this writer by filling in a semantic differential scale with ‘unprofessional’, ‘uneducated’ and ‘not proficient’ on one end and ‘professional’, ‘educated’ and ‘proficient’ on the other end. The participants were informed whether the writer of the text was an L1 or an L2 speaker of English. The reliability of ‘comprehensibility’ comprising three items was good:  $\alpha = .85$ . The mean of all three items was

used to calculate the compound variable ‘comprehensibility’, which was used for further analyses. Furthermore, the reliability of ‘competence’ comprising three items was also good:  $\alpha = .89$ . The mean of all three items was used to calculate the compound variable ‘competence’, which was also used for further analyses. The dependent variables, competence of the writer and comprehensibility of the text were measured at interval level.

## Procedure

The participants were individually sent a link to the survey they had to fill in on Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2005). The participants participated voluntarily, so there was no reward. At the beginning of the survey, the topic of the experiment was briefly explained, but the aim of the experiment was left out. At the end of the survey, the participants were debriefed. Four different surveys were sent to the same amount of participants and the whole experiment took approximately fifteen minutes. Firstly, the participants had to fill in some background information about themselves. This included questions about their age, gender, academic year, whether they were enrolled in an English-taught programme, whether their mother tongue was Dutch, their estimation of their level in English and whether their English was better than their Dutch. After filling in the background questions, the participants evaluated four emails each, also by filling in a questionnaire. Per text, they had to answer six questions on a semantic differential scale. Lastly, the participants had to do a language test to determine their general language proficiency in English. This test is called LexTALE (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012), which is an online lexical decision task that predicts vocabulary knowledge. A word appeared on the screen and the participants had to decide whether it was an existing or non-existing English word (nonword).

## Statistical treatment

Multiple two-way ANOVAs were performed in order to answer the research questions, since there are two independent variables with each two levels and two dependent variables. First, a two-way analysis of variance was conducted with idiomaticity and writer of the text as within-subjects factors to examine the effect of idiomaticity and writer of the text on competence of the writer. The interaction effect between the two independent variables was also tested. In addition, a two-way analysis of variance was conducted to examine the effect of idiomaticity and writer on comprehensibility of the text with these as within-subjects

factors. The ANOVA tests showed whether there was an effect and whether there was an interaction effect between the variables idiomaticity and writer.

## Results

The goal of this study was to examine the effect of idiomaticity and the nativeness of a writer on the comprehension of a text and on the evaluation of L2 speakers in an ELF context. Table 2 shows the frequencies and the percentages of the participants in the four different conditions. Concerning the participants, seven participants stated to be older than 30, but did not precise their age. Consequently, they had to be excluded in order to calculate the mean, standard deviation and the range of the participants' age. Five extreme outliers that had a duration above 3000 seconds were excluded when calculating the mean, standard deviation and the range. The mean duration of filling in the questionnaire without the outliers was 762 seconds ( $SD = 550$ ; range = 183-2811). However, the participants who had a duration above 3000 seconds were not excluded from the study, because the other responses still seemed valid. In addition, two participants had a Turkish and an Indonesian nationality. Therefore, they were excluded from the study, because the questionnaire was only meant for Dutch participants.

Table 2. The frequencies and percentages of the participants in each of the four conditions.

	Native	Non-native
Idioms	26 (30.6)	21 (24.7)
No idioms	18 (21.2)	20 (23.5)

Table 3. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) for the comprehensibility and competence of emails in function of idiomaticity and nativeness of writer (1 = very low comprehensibility / competence, 5 = very high comprehensibility / competence).

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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)

In order to answer the research questions, a two-way analysis of variance was conducted. This two way analysis of variance with idiomaticity (idiomaticity) and writer (writer) as factors showed a non-significant main effect of idiomaticity on comprehensibility ( $F(1, 81) = 1.04, p = .310$ ). Writer also was found to have a non-significant main effect on comprehensibility ( $F(1, 81) < 1$ ). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and writer was not statistically significant either ( $F(1, 81) < 1$ ). Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for the comprehensibility of emails in function of idiomaticity and nativeness of writer.

In addition, another two-way analysis was performed to answer these sub questions in order to know whether idiomaticity and nativeness of the writer had an effect on competence. This two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity (idiomaticity) and writer (writer) as factors showed a non-significant main effect of idiomaticity on competence ( $F(1, 81) = 1.77, p = .188$ ). Writer also was found to have a non-significant main effect on competence ( $F(1,81) < 1$ ). Similarly, the interaction effect between idiomaticity and writer was not statistically significant ( $F(1, 81) < 1$ ). Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for the competence of emails in function of idiomaticity and nativeness of the writer.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) for the comprehensibility and competence of emails in function of idiomaticity and nativeness of writer of participants who had a LexTALE score higher than 80 (1 = very low comprehensibility / competence, 5 = very high comprehensibility / competence).

	Idioms		No idioms	
	Native	Non-Native	Native	Non-Native
	n = 13	n = 6	n = 11	n = 11
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Comprehensibility	4.56 (.37)	4.51 (.42)	4.47 (.42)	4.52 (.27)
Competence	3.97 (.61)	(3.60) (.65)	3.58 (.45)	3.86 (.33)

We decided to do extra analyses to discover whether the results would be different if we only performed analyses with participants who had a more advanced English level. These participants had a LexTALE score higher than 80. This means that the participants with a LexTALE score lower than 80 were excluded from the analyses. A two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity (idiomaticity) and writer (writer) as factors showed a non-significant main effect of idiomaticity on comprehensibility ( $F(1, 37) < 1$ ). Writer also was found to have a non-significant main effect on comprehensibility ( $F(1, 37) < 1$ ). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and writer was not statistically significant ( $F(1, 37) < 1$ ).

Furthermore, a two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity (idiomaticity) and writer (writer) as factors showed a non-significant main effect of idiomaticity on competence ( $F(1, 37) = 1.77, p = .188$ ). Writer also was found to have a non-significant main effect on competence ( $F(1, 37) < 1$ ). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and writer was not

statistically significant ( $F(1, 37) = 3.70, p = .062$ ). Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations for the comprehensibility and competence of emails in function of idiomaticity and nativeness of the writer with LexTALE scores higher than 80.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover whether the use of idioms and nativeness of a writer influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting. Our research question was *to what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgments of texts and speakers in an ELF setting?*. This research question was approached from two angles. Firstly, we wanted to know to what extent L2 speakers of English evaluate the use of idiomatic expressions as making a text more comprehensible and the writer more competent than the absence of idiomatic expressions. Secondly, we wanted to know to what extent there is 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.

According to the results, emails containing idioms were not easier or harder to comprehend than emails without idioms by Dutch L2 speakers of English. In addition, L1 and L2 speakers who used idioms were not evaluated as more or less competent than L1 and L2 speakers who did not use idioms. Moreover, concerning the writer of the text, Dutch L2 speakers of English did not understand the text of L1 speakers more or less easily than the text of L2 speakers. Additionally, Dutch L2 speakers of English did not rate L1 speakers as more competent than L2 speakers.

None of the results was significant, which means that we did not find a significant effect of the use of idioms and the nativeness of the writer on comprehensibility of texts and competence of L1 and L2 speakers. If we look at the results, our hypothesis was not confirmed. It is inconclusive as to whether or not there is actually an effect.

The speakers that came across as generally proficient in the study by Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006) used formulaic sequences. This concept does not only involve idioms, but also collocations, binomials, lexical bundles and speech formulae. In our study, only idioms were used, which are part of formulaic sequences, but it is not the same. The fact that collocations, binomials, lexical bundles and speech formulae were not included in our study, might have influenced our results. Carrol and Conklin (2019) tested whether there was a difference in processing between three different types of formulaic phrases, such as collocations, binomials and idioms. The results showed that this processing advantage existed

for all three types, but there were additional effects according to the particular properties that are related to each type. The fact that there was a slight difference in results for each type could have led to a contrast in results between the study by Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006) and our study.

Another difference between other studies and our study is that other studies only recruited participants that had an advanced level in English (Al-Hoorie, 2016; Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer, 2006; Laufer, 2000). The mean score of the English proficiency task in this study was 79.3 ( $SD = 12.24$ ; range = 48.75 - 100), which shows that there were participants with an advanced English level, but also some participants with a less advanced English level. However, this difference could not have caused the differences between the results of our study and the results of other studies, because several ANOVAs were conducted using the data of participants that scored 80 or higher on the English proficiency test. All of the tests resulted in a non-significant effect of idiomaticity and nativeness on comprehensibility and competence.

In addition, there were also practical objections. In our study, there was no statistically significant effect between using idioms and not using idioms concerning comprehensibility of the emails. The explanation for this might be that only idioms from the English-German Database of Idiom Norms (Beck & Weber, 2016) that had a familiarity rating higher than six were used. Participants probably were familiar with the idioms and therefore, idioms did not influence the comprehensibility of the emails.

Moreover, there was no significant difference between the emails with idioms and the emails without idioms concerning the understanding of the email. However, the participants were not asked to give a short summary of the email or to write down what they understood. There is a possibility that the idioms were indeed easy to understand or the participants might have been embarrassed to indicate that the text was hard, not clear or not easy to understand. It might have been better to ask the participants whether they really understood the text by asking them to summarize the email in order to check whether they understood it.

A limitation of this study might be that a between-subjects design was used. This means that a participant was only exposed to one condition. There were four conditions, so there were four groups of participants. This design was used because there were four emails per condition and there were four conditions, which means that participants would have had to evaluate sixteen emails if a within-subjects design was used. This would have taken the participants too much time and there would have been a risk that the participants could guess the goal of the study. Due to the between-subjects design, individual differences could have

interfered with the experiment and might have been a factor why there are no significant results found in this study. Perhaps when this experiment will be repeated, a within-subjects design can be used.

Another limitation is that convenience sampling was used, which is a non-probability sampling method. Participants that were conveniently available were asked to participate in this study, such as friends, family and fellow students. The risk of convenience sampling is that it is hard to generalize the results, because some subgroups in the sample might be under-represented. Other people that represent the population might not have been in the sample. A suggestion would be to use the simple random sampling method. In this case, every person in the population has more even chance of being selected in the sample and therefore, the results could be generalised to the wider population.

Lastly, there was only a small number of participants in each condition. To be specific, there were 26 participants in the native idioms condition, 21 participants in the non-native idioms condition, 18 participants in the native no-idioms condition and 20 participants in the non-native no idioms condition. If there was a large number of participants in each condition, the risk of having biased groups could have been reduced. With a small number of participants, it is likely that the sample that was used did not represent the entire population. This could have influenced the results. Hence, if this study was repeated, the sample size should be larger.

A suggestion for future research could be to study the difference between oral proficiency and written proficiency of L2 speakers of English that use idioms. In the study by Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006), the authors did find an effect of using idioms on a speaker's oral proficiency, albeit in our study there were no effects found of the use of idioms on a speaker's written proficiency. The study by Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers and Demecheleer (2006) showed that L2 speakers that used formulaic sequences were perceived as more proficient than L2 speakers that did not use formulaic sequences. In addition, the study by Üstünbaş and Ortaçtepe (2016) also showed that using formulaic language in an ELF context leads to higher proficiency scores than not using formulaic language during an oral proficiency exam. The difference was that in the study by Boers et al. (2006) and Üstünbaş and Ortaçtepe (2016), participants' oral proficiency was judged, whereas we judged their written proficiency. There are many differences between speech and writing, such as interdependence, which means that spoken language conveys more explicit information than written language. Huxham, Campbell and Westwood (2012) tested whether there was a difference in evaluation between oral and written performance. Their results

showed that participants' oral skills were significantly better assessed than their written skills. In addition, the participants thought that oral assessments were handier than written assessments. This supports the expectation that the difference between the results of the study by Boers et al. (2006) and Üstünbaş and Ortaçtepe (2016) and our study might be due to the differences between speech and writing. This future study might explain whether L2 learners of English that use idioms are perceived as more proficient when speaking than when writing.

### Conclusion

To summarize, this study did not find any evidence for the fact that idiomatic expressions influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting. Moreover, there was also no evidence for the fact that L2 speakers of English found a text more comprehensible or a writer more competent when idioms were used than when idioms were not used. Furthermore, according to the results, there was no difference in evaluation of the text and speaker when the writer was assumed to be a non-native speaker compared to when the writer was assumed to be a native speaker. The results illustrate that more research is needed on the written and oral evaluation of speakers and writers who use idiomatic expressions in an ELF setting. More generally, we advocate that future studies should be undertaken with a thoughtful design. Having more than 20 participants per condition, having a within-subjects design and making use of a random sampling method is very important for future research.

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## Appendix

### 1 - Business trip

Idiom	L1 familiarity (mean)	L2 familiarity (mean)
Break the ice	6,61	6,90
Food for thought	6,50	4,96
Get the ball rolling	6,68	5,32
Hold down the fort	6,54	2,55
Seize the opportunity	6,55	5,20

#### Version with idioms

Dear all,

As many of you may have already heard our team will be going on a trip to Dublin to visit the company Forte. We will be visiting this company to **get the ball rolling** on an international collaboration between our companies. The market is currently in our favour, so we should definitely **seize the opportunity** to set up this collaboration.

This trip will be mostly business-related, but we will also have some free time. There is still no schedule for the spare time we have, any suggestions are welcome so that's **food for thought** for you all. As this team is fairly new, I would like to **break the ice** by going to a casual dinner together before we leave. Dan and Susie from the marketing department will also be joining us for this dinner, as they will be **holding down the fort** in our department while we're gone.

I will be sending you all the itinerary for our trip shortly.

Kind regards,

Anne Miller / Anne van den Boogaard

#### Version without idioms

Dear all,

As many of you may have already heard our team will be going on a trip to Dublin to visit another company. We will be visiting the company to get things started on an international collaboration between our companies. The market is currently in our favour, so we should definitely take advantage of the situation to set up this collaboration.

This trip will be mostly business-related, but we will also have some free time. There is still no schedule for the spare time we have, any suggestions are welcome so that's something to think about for you all. As this team is fairly new, I would like to ease any awkwardness by going to a casual dinner together before we leave. Dan and Susie from the marketing

department will also be joining us for this dinner, as they will be looking after business in our department while we're gone.

I will be sending you all the itinerary for our trip shortly.

Kind regards,

Anne Miller / Anne van den Boogaard

## 2. Schedule a monthly meeting

Idiom	L1 familiarity (mean)	L2 familiarity (mean)
Speak your mind	6,63	5,15
Talk a mile a minute	6,15	3,25
Draw a blank	6,73	3,25
Do the honors	6,65	4,65
Set the pace	6,22	5,21

### Version with idioms

Dear all,

Last week, we started a new project concerning our social media strategy. To discuss how the project is going for each group, we would like to schedule a monthly meeting the first Monday of every month. This will be the perfect opportunity **to speak your mind** and ask questions.

The meeting will always take place in one of the meeting rooms in our headquarters in Nijmegen on the first floor. For further details about which room, we will contact you shortly before the start of the meeting. The duration of the meeting is two hours, so there's plenty of time and no need to **talk a mile a minute**. To avoid that one of you **draws a blank**, we will always send you a reminder two days beforehand. Jeanette will **do the honors** and host the first meeting.

Let's say, we'll just **set the pace** by having this meeting monthly and we can always change the frequency of the meeting if preferred.

Kind regards,

Joyce McGee / Joyce de Jong

### Version without idioms

Dear all,

Last week, we started a new project concerning our social media strategy. To discuss how the project is going for each group, we would like to schedule a monthly meeting the first Monday of every month. This will be the perfect opportunity to give your opinion and ask questions.

The meeting will always take place in one of the meeting rooms in our headquarters in Nijmegen on the first floor. For further details about which room, we will contact you shortly before the start of the meeting. The duration of the meeting is two hours, so there's plenty of time and no need to speak fast. To avoid that one of you forgets the meeting, we will always send you a reminder two days beforehand. Jeanette will be the first to host a meeting.

Let's say, we'll just set the tempo by meeting once a month and we can always change the frequency of the meeting if preferred.

Kind regards,

Joyce McGee / Joyce de Jong

### 3 - Organizational change (HQ is going to move)

Idiom	L1 familiarity (mean)	L2 familiarity (mean)
A piece of cake	6,77	6,20
Break the record	6,5	6,70
Clear the air	6,05	5,55
Do the trick	6,17	5,10
Throw money out the window	6,04	5,95

#### Version with idioms

Dear all,

As you all know very well, our headquarters will be moving to a different location this year. In this email we would like to **clear the air** about the upcoming organizational changes.

First of all, we want to assure you that we are not just **throwing money out of the window** with the reorganization. The new headquarters will have a lot more space and resources to let us grow as a company. As you know, our desire has always been to **break the record** in our market. We are convinced that an improved office will **do the trick**.

Secondly, you do not have to worry that your job is going to change very much. You will only be working at a different location. If we will do this together, the upcoming organizational change will be a **piece of cake**.

Do not hesitate to respond with any questions to this email.

Kind regards,

Oscar Groen / Oscar Hughes

Version without idioms

Dear all,

As you all know very well, our headquarters will be moving to a different location this year. In this email we would like to make sure there will be no misunderstandings about the upcoming organizational changes.

First of all, we want to assure you that we are not wasting money with the reorganization. The new headquarters will have a lot more space and resources to let us grow as a company. As you know, our desire has always been to be the best in our market. We are convinced that an improved office will achieve the desired effect.

Secondly, you do not have to worry that your job is going to change very much. You will only be working at a different location. If we will do this together, the upcoming organizational change will be very easy.

Do not hesitate to respond with any questions to this email.

Kind regards,

Oscar Groen / Oscar Hughes

**4 - New Office in a different location (expansion of the company)**

Idiom	L1 familiarity (mean)	L2 familiarity (mean)
Let the cat out of the bag	6,35	5,15
Giving it a whirl	6,23	2,69
Learn the ropes	6,34	2,45
Take the plunge	6,50	3,40
See the world	6,45	6,20

Version with idioms

Dear all,

I am more than happy to finally **let the cat out of the bag** and announce that we are opening our new office in Amsterdam in October.

After **giving it a whirl** and opening a Start-up in Germany in 2010, we have faced plenty of challenges and **learned the ropes**. In 2015 we opened an office in England, in 2017 another one in Germany, and in 2019 in Sweden. Now 10 years later, **we are taking the plunge** and take on the next challenge: we expand to the Netherlands.

We have all worked very hard in the last couple of years and I am proud to see how this company has made it from a Start-up business to a company with over 120 employees.

I would like to thank all of you for your work and your support and I look forward **to seeing more of the world** with you.

Kind regards,

Tim Johnson / Tim Jansen

Version without idioms

Dear all,

We have been waiting for it and I am very proud to announce that we are finally opening a new office in Amsterdam in October.

Starting our business in 2010 here in Germany, we have faced plenty of challenges and experienced an amazing development. In 2015 we opened an office in England, in 2017 another one in Germany, and in 2019 in Sweden. Now 10 years later, we have come to the point to take on the next challenge: we expand to the Netherlands. We have all worked very hard in the last couple of years and I am proud to see how this company has made it from a Start-up business to a company with over 120 employees.

I would like to thank all of you for your work and your support and I look forward to keep growing with you even more.

Kind regards,

Tim Johnson / Tim Jansen