

Bachelor Thesis

The Effects of Idiomatic Expressions and
Nativeness of Writer on the Evaluations of Text
and Speaker by English L2 Speakers

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Abstract

Previous literature found that the correct use of idiomatic expressions positively influenced the judgements by natives of the proficiency of L2 speakers (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006). The current study investigated the effects of the use of idiomatic expressions in an ELF setting, which is often the default setting for international business (Cogo, 2012). To find out more about the effects of idioms in an ELF setting, this study tried to answer the research question: “to what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting?”. Answers to this question might be interesting and relevant for people or businesses that act in an ELF setting to improve their communication skills. Because, if there is a positive relation between the correct use of idioms and the perceived proficiency, professionalism and education level of non-natives, they might focus more on learning these expressions in order to be able to use them in their daily communication. The research question was answered using 4 different questionnaires filled in by 87 Dutch students. The students were asked to evaluate the comprehensibility and competence of the writer of business emails. The factors in the questionnaires were the presence or absence of idioms and the information if the writer of the email was native or non-native. The results of the current study showed that idiomaticity and nativeness of the writer did not significantly effect the evaluations of the comprehensibility of the text and the competence of the writer. This, however, does not mean that the relationship between idiomaticity and judgements of comprehensibility and competence in an ELF setting does not exist. It can be expected that there is a relationship, since research has found this relationship when natives evaluated L2 learners. Further research will be necessary to find out more about this issue.

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions, like *'to kick the bucket'* or *'to see eye to eye'*, are a type of expressions that have a meaning that is different from the meaning of the sum of the individual words in the expression (Weinreich, 1969). The role of idiomatic expressions in everyday language is known to be significant both for natives as for non-natives (Thyab, 2016). Most languages are full of idioms (Boers, 2008). The literature gives us answers to how these expressions are processed (Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Bulut & Çelik-Yazici, 2004; Siyanova-Chanturia, Conklin & Schmitt, 2011). Research has, for example, shown that second language (L2) speakers process idioms differently than first language (L1) speakers (Cooper, 1999). As a result, it is often difficult for L2 speakers to process and/or use idioms (Bulut & Çelik-Yazici, 2004; Cooper, 1999). It is important for L2 speakers that they overcome this challenge, since research has shown that there are many benefits to the correct use of idiomatic expressions (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Gibbs, Bogdanovich, Sykes, & Barr, 1997). For example, the correct use of idioms by L2 speakers is beneficial to the evaluation of their fluency and proficiency (Boers et al., 2006). In turn, language proficiency is known to have a variety of benefits in the business and education field (McManus, Gould & Welch, 1983; Blake, Mcleod, Verdon, & Fuller, 2018; Burgess & Greis 1970). For instance, research has shown that English proficiency correlates positively with income advantages (McManus et al., 1983).

The positive effects of the use of idioms by L2 speakers on their perceived language proficiency and the income and academic benefits this brings are of importance in the setting of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Meaning that a situation is formed where two or more communicators are second language speakers of English. The rapid spread of English around the world has led to greater numbers of non-native speakers of the language than native speakers (Crystal, 2003). This means that ELF settings have become inescapable, especially in international business settings (Cogo, 2012).

Knowing what the effects of the use of idiomatic expressions are in ELF settings might be beneficial for L2 speakers of English. By knowing if the effects of using idioms are positive, a speaker might focus more on learning idioms to be able to use them in ELF communication. As previous stated, research has shown that using idiomatic expressions positively effects language proficiency of L2 speakers as perceived by natives (Boers et al., 2006). However, the literature does not seem to offer information on the effects of the use of idiomatic expressions in ELF settings. Therefore, the present study tries to fill this research

gap by investigating to what extent idiomatic expressions influence ELF communication. Findings of this study might show benefits of the use of idiomatic expressions for students and companies. In the remainder of this section research on the use of idiomatic expressions in general and within an ELF setting will be discussed and the research question of the current study will be presented.

Idiomatic expressions in L2

Weinreich (1969) stated that the meaning of idioms cannot be deduced from the literal meaning of the sum of the individual words. This means that one has to know the meaning of an idiom to know what someone tries to say. Idiomatic expressions are specific to a culture and language and their meaning is specific to that language (Maisa & Karunakaran, 2013). So, it might be expected that L2 learners are being taught the idioms of the language they are studying. However, idiomatic expressions seem to be often neglected in language use and learning (Maisa & Karunakaran, 2013), while Thyab (2016) pointed out that idiomatic expressions are used in everyday language both in formal and informal settings by natives. As a consequence, non-native speakers often have a gap in their knowledge and proficiency of a foreign language, which lets them come across as less fluent (Thyab, 2016).

For this study, it is interesting to explore what previous literature has found about the differences between L1 and L2 speakers in processing idiomatic expressions. The reason for this is that it is possible that differences in processing idioms might lead to different evaluations of the use of idiomatic expressions. Swinney and Cutler (1979) conducted a study to find out more about how L1 speakers of English process idioms. According to their study, idioms are not stored and retrieved in a special way, but as any other word. However, literature shows that L2 speakers of English seem to process idioms differently than L1 speakers do (e.g. Bulut & Çelik-Yazici, 2004; Siyanova-Chanturia, Conklin & Schmitt, 2011). Cooper (1999) states that L1 speakers process idioms in the blink of an eye, while L2 speakers often need to take time to consider a series of possible meanings in order to arrive at a plausible interpretation. By doing this they use a heuristic approach, meaning that *“a problem is solved by discovery and experimentation in a trial-and-error, rule-of-thumb manner rather than according to a planned route specified by an algorithmic approach. In teaching, heuristic implies 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, 1999:254-255). With this approach L2 speakers might find the correct meaning of the idiom, but often they might also give an incorrect meaning to

the idiom. If the latter happens, L2 speakers can be at a loss to understand conversations because they misinterpreted the key idiom in a sentence. Moreover, L2 learners might use an idiom in an incorrect way, which causes natives to be puzzled by what the L2 learner means with the idiom. Thus, Cooper (1999) concludes, idioms are often a stumbling block for every L2 speaker of English. As a consequence, teaching methods need to be based on an understanding of how learners comprehend idioms.

However, a distinction between less advanced and more advanced English speakers should be made when it comes to idioms being a stumbling block. Vanlacker-Sidtis (2003) found that the more advanced a L2 speaker's proficiency is, the more likely this non-native is able to understand an idiomatic expression. Moreover, she found that highly proficient L2 speakers are able to discriminate easily between idiomatic and literal meanings of idioms.

Benefits of idiomatic expressions

It is important for L2 speakers to overcome this so-called stumbling block, since there are many benefits to the correct use of idiomatic expressions. A finding of previous studies about idioms (Conklin and Schmitt, 2008; Gibbs, Bogdanovich, Sykes, and Barr, 1997) that may be a benefit to L2 speakers is that knowledge of idiomatic expressions leads to a processing advantage. This might make communication in a second language more efficient and more effortless. Various researchers studied processing advantages of idiomatic expressions. First of all, Conklin and Schmitt (2008) investigated the comprehension of formulaic sequences (standardised phrases such as collocations and idiomatic expressions) by comparing reading times for formulaic sequences versus matched nonformulaic phrases for native and non-native speakers. They found that formulaic sequences were processed significantly faster than nonformulaic language. Interestingly, the study showed that this processing advantage was observed for both L1 and L2 English speakers. This is in line with the findings of Gibbs, Bogdanovich, Sykes, and Barr (1997) for L1 speakers. They provide evidence that L1 speakers quickly understand formulaic sequences in context and that they are not more difficult to understand than literal speech. Conklin and Schmitt (2008) underline this conclusion and add that this can also be concluded for L2 speakers, which seems to be in conflict with the conclusion of Cooper (1999) about idioms being a stumbling block. The study of Carey (2013) brings a little nuance in the discussion of the use and comprehension of formulaic sequences by L2 speakers of English. This study provided evidence that L2 speakers are storing and retrieving chunks (fixed string of words) in the mental lexicon in the same way as native speakers do. However, L2 speakers also have the tendency to produce

approximated forms of these chunks, in conversations as well as in written texts (Carey, 2013). What is meant by this, is that they almost use a formulaic sequence correctly, mixing up one or two words. This might have the consequence that Cooper (1999) mentioned, leaving natives puzzled with a wrongly used idiom leading to miscommunication.

A second benefit of using idioms, is that it improves the way one comes across in English. Boers et al. (2006) found that the use of idioms by L2 speakers is beneficial to the evaluation of their fluency and proficiency. Boers et al. (2006) concluded this in their study among L2 students of English who were exposed to phrase-noticing activities and a group of students that was not exposed to these activities. Students from both groups had to perform an oral conversation in which they were evaluated by teachers on their English language proficiency. It turned out that the phrase-noticing group used the formulaic sequences that they came across in their classes during the conversation with their teachers. The results showed that the use of these formulaic sequences led to higher evaluations of the students' fluency and language proficiency. The study also found that low proficient L2 speakers use fewer idioms in their second language than highly proficient L2 speakers.

So, the use of idioms by L2 speakers of English positively influence the evaluation of their English language proficiency. In turn, English proficiency, the degree to which a person has mastered the English language, shows some significant benefits for speakers in the business and educational field (McManus et al., 1983; Blake et al., 2018; Burgess and Greis, 1970). For instance, English proficiency correlates positively with income advantages (McManus et al., 1983; Blake et al., 2018). In the educational field we see that English proficiency correlates positively with grade point averages (Burgess and Greiss, 1970).

English as a Lingua Franca

So, idioms can influence the perceived proficiency of a L2 speaker, which in turn is highly correlated with income and academic success. This is of importance in the setting of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), in which international business often takes place (Ehrenreich, 2016). An ELF setting is formed when two or more communicators are L2 speakers of English. Seidlhofer (2009) stated that the English language does not stop spreading and that it is the most spoken L2. Apart from the work of Seidlhofer, a vast amount of research has been done into ELF. For example, according to Kaur (2011), ELF situations cause for the communication in English to often be unpredictable and unstable. Crystal (2003) pointed out that the rapid spread of English around the world has resulted in a greater number

of non-native speakers of the language than native speakers. He estimates that approximately for every one native there are three non-native speakers of English. So, it seems that ELF settings have become the default situation, especially in international business settings (Cogo, 2012). However, unlike the findings of the positive effects of the use of idioms on evaluations of L2 speakers by natives (Boers et al. 2006), there are no previous studies that give information about the effects of idioms on evaluations of speakers' competence in an ELF setting. It might be that these effects will be different, since L2 learners are more likely to fail to notice formulaic expressions when they encounter them (Eyckmans, Boers, & Stengers, 2007). So, L2 speakers of English might not even notice that other L2 speakers are using an idiomatic expression. For managers and employees in an ELF setting it is of importance to find out more about the influence of idioms, in order to know whether they should use or avoid them when they want to come across as being understandable and competent.

In sum, previous literature shows that the correct and incorrect use of idiomatic expressions both influence the judgements that natives make about the language proficiency of another speaker. However, there is not much information about the influence of the use of idiomatic expressions on the judgements by addressees that are non-native speakers. Literature does not seem to offer this information, while this could be important information for ELF settings. Because if there is an influence of the use of idioms on the judgements by addressees, students and businesses might focus more on learning and teaching the correct use of idioms. As stated before, literature has shown that the use of idiomatic expressions by L2 speakers correlates positively with the evaluations of L2 speakers by natives. This would be a good reason to offer more idiom teaching methods to L2 learners. Nevertheless, if the use of idiomatic expressions also turns out to have a positive effect on the judgements of L2 learners of English, this would give an extra reason to focus on idiom teaching methods. Especially if it is kept in mind, as previous stated, that there are around three L2 speakers of English for every native speaker of English (Crystal, 2003). However, since the literature has shown that L2 learners process idiomatic expressions differently than L1 speakers (Bulut & Çelik-Yazici, 2004; Siyanova-Chanturia, Conklin & Schmitt, 2011; Cooper, 1999), it might be that their evaluations of the use of idiomatic expressions also are different. Reasons for this are that L2 speakers of English might not notice that an idiom is used at all (Eyckmans, Boers, & Stengers, 2007) or they might misinterpret the used idiom (Cooper, 1999).

This has led to the following research question: To what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting? We will

investigate both the judgements by L2 speakers about the text and the speaker, because it might be that a L2 learner of English evaluates the use of idiomatic expressions by the speaker as being very competent but at the same time he might not comprehend what the text is saying. The research question contains 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? and 2) To what extent do L2 speakers of English evaluate native speakers of English as being able to write a more comprehensible text and being more competent than a non-native speaker of English? The literature shows that idiomatic expressions positively influence the native speaker evaluations of L2 learners (Boers et al., 2006). Since L2 speakers process idioms differently, the hypothesis is that this leads also to different evaluations by L2 speakers of the use of idioms.

Methodology

Materials

To find an answer to the research question, an experiment has been conducted with 4 different English emails (see appendix) from a business context. Each text contained an approximate of 10 lines. We created two versions of the same texts: One with idiomatic expressions and one without. A text with idiomatic expressions contained no more than 5 of them to not make it not too obvious that this is the manipulation. Otherwise, it might have influenced the answers of the participants. The idioms were selected from the database of Beck and Weber (2016). Native speakers gave the idioms in this database a familiarity rating. We have only picked idioms that have a familiarity rating higher than 6.0, since the participants would then be more likely to recognize the idioms. The texts were written by 5 students of the bachelor International Business Communication at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, who are all non-natives. To make sure that a text with idiomatic expressions was kept similar to its counterpart without idiomatic expressions, they both had the same theme and build up. In total the emails had 4 different themes. Namely, the information about a business trip, the scheduling of a monthly meeting, the explanation of an organizational change, and the announcement of opening a new office. Since the texts were written with and without idiomatic expressions, there was a total of 8 texts. Half of the participants received the information that the texts were written by a native speaker of English, the other half received the information that they were written by non-native speakers of English. Two native speakers

of English checked the texts on spelling and grammatical errors. The texts can be found in appendix 1.

Subjects

The subjects who participated in the experiment were 87 Dutch university students who were L2 speakers of English. From these 87 participants that completed the questionnaire, 2 participants had to be excluded. These participants did not have Dutch as their first language which might have influenced their judgements on the used idioms in the emails. The reason for focusing on students instead of focussing on subjects from different layers of society, is the high level of English proficiency of Dutch students. The ages of the students ranged from 16 to 35 with $M = 23.13$, $SD = 4.10$. 60 respondents filled in that they were university bachelor or master students and the remaining 25 filled in 'other'. The exact frequencies and percentages of the educational level of the participants can be found in Table 1. The distribution of gender was 48 female and 37 male. On a scale from 1 (very low) to 10 (very high), participants estimated their level of English to be relatively high. ($M = 7.41$, $SD = 1.06$). At the end of the survey they also had to fill in a vocabulary test, the LexTALE (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012), which gave a score from 0 to 100 (0 = very low, 100 = very high). The results of this test showed a mean of $M = 79.25$ and a standard deviation of $SD = 12.24$.

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of the educational level of participants

Academic Year	Frequency	Percent
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

Design

A 2x2 between-subjects design was used for the experiment. Thus, a student was exposed to the 4 emails with different themes in one condition. Since there were 4 different conditions, there were 4 different questionnaires. The reason for choosing a between-subjects design over a within-subjects design is that the respondents had to read less texts which made them more likely to complete the survey. Two independent variables were present in the texts. The first variable was the use of idiomatic expressions or not. The second variable was the statement if the text was written by a native or by a non-native. The dependent variables were *Comprehensibility* and *Competence*.

Instruments

The dependent variables were operationalised by using a questionnaire with questions about the judgements of the participants after every text they read. The first dependent variable was the *Comprehensibility* of the text. Three questions were dedicated to this variable. Namely, the questions, “Is the text easy to read?”, “Is it clear what the text is about?” “Did you understand the text?”, were asked. Participants were offered a five-point semantic differential scale (e.g. ‘difficult’ – ‘easy’) to fill in as an answer to the questions. The second dependent variable was the *Competence* of the writer. A five-point semantic differential scale with the dimensions proficiency, professionalism, and education was used to operationalise this variable. The formulation of the questions, which were retrieved from Nejjari (2020), were, “Does the writer of the text seem to have a proficient level of English?”, “Does the writer of the text come across as being professional?”, and “Does the writer of the text come across as having a high education?”. A Cronbach’s Alpha test was conducted to test the reliability of the dependent variables *Comprehensibility* and *Competence*. The reliability of *Comprehensibility* comprising three items was good: $\alpha = .85$. Consequently, the mean of all three items was used to calculate the compound variable *Comprehensibility*, which was used in the further analyses. The reliability of *Competence* comprising three items was good: $\alpha = .89$. Consequently, the mean of all three items was used to calculate the compound variable *Competence*, which was used in the further analyses.

Procedure

The recruitment of the subjects has taken place at the Radboud University of Nijmegen. Students from the university were asked for a moment to individually fill in an online questionnaire on *Qualtrics* (Qualtrics, 2020). The students were told that they would participate in a language study, but they were not given any further information. There were no financial rewards or other incentives for participation. Before reading the texts, the participants were asked to fill in a background questionnaire. The questions were regarding their age, gender, education level. After this, the participants had to complete the English LexTALE vocabulary test (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012). According to Lemhöfer and Broersma (2012) LexTALE provides a useful and valid measure of English vocabulary knowledge of medium- to high-proficient learners of English as a second language. Then the texts were presented and after each text a set of questions were answered. First, the questions on the comprehensibility of the text were asked, then questions on the proficiency, professionalism, and education of the writer were presented. The order of the presented texts were randomized for each participant to counter fatigue effects. The survey took about 15 minutes to be filled in. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study after filling in the questionnaire.

Statistical treatment

To answer the research question two two-way ANOVAs were performed testing the effect of two independent variables (Nativity, Use of idioms) on 2 dependent variables (Comprehensibility, Competence). The first ANOVA had *Nativity* and *Use of idioms* as its independent variables and *Comprehensibility* was the dependent variable. The second ANOVA also had *Nativity* and *Use of idioms* as its independent variables but here *Competence* was the dependent variable. Both ANOVAs had only between-subjects factors. The data from the questionnaires have been analysed with SPSS (IBM Corp., 2016).

Results

Table 2. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) for the *Comprehensibility* and *Competence* of e-mails in function of *Idiomacity* and *Nativity* of 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

	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
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)

The data in Table 2 shows that the differences between the means of the different conditions were very small. Especially the means of the *Comprehensibility* variable were quite extreme and the standard deviations were relatively small. To answer the two sub questions (“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?” and “To what extent do L2 speakers of English evaluate native speakers of English as being able to write a more comprehensible text and being more competent than a non-native speaker of English?”) two two-way analysis of variance with *Idiomatcity* and *Nativeness* as factors were conducted. The first ANOVA, which met the assumption of homogeneity of variance, did not find a significant main effect of *Idiomatcity* on *Comprehensibility* ($F(1, 81) = 1.04, p = .310$). *Nativeness* was also not found to have a significant main effect on *Comprehensibility* ($F(1, 81) < 1$). The interaction effect between *Idiomatcity* and *Nativeness* was not statistically significant ($F(1, 81) < 1$).

The second ANOVA, which met the assumption of homogeneity of variance, did not find a significant main effect of *Idiomatcity* on *Competence* ($F(1, 81) = 1.77, p = .188$). *Nativeness* was also not found to have a significant main effect on *Competence* ($F(1, 81) < 1$). The interaction effect between *Idiomatcity* and *Nativeness* was not statistically significant ($F(1, 81) < 1$).

Since we found no significant effects in the first two ANOVA’s, we conducted two new ANOVA’s for highly proficient L2 speakers of English. It might be that because of their better knowledge of English, this group of people responded differently in the different conditions. For this group, we selected the people that had a LexTALE score above 80. The means and standard deviations of the different groups with a LexTALE score above 80 can be found in Table 3. The data in Table 3 shows that the differences between the means of the different conditions were small. The standard deviations were in these groups also relatively small. What is noticeable is that the means of the *Competence* variable show a trend. Namely,

the use of idioms has a positive effect on the perceived competence of natives, while for non-natives this has a negative effect on their perceived competence.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) of participants with LexTALE score > 80 for the *Comprehensibility* and *Competence* of e-mails and speakers in function of *Idiomacity* and *Nativeness* of writer (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	4.56 (.37)	4.51 (.41)	4.47 (.42)	4.52 (.27)
Competence	3.97 (.61)	3.60 (.65)	3.58 (.45)	3.86 (.33)

So, two new two-way analysis of variance with *Idiomacity* and *Nativeness* as factors were conducted. For these ANOVA's only the cases where selected with a LexTALE score higher than 80. The first ANOVA, which met the assumption of homogeneity of variance, did not find a significant main effect of *Idiomacity* on *Comprehensibility* ($F(1, 37) < 1$). *Nativeness* was also not found to have a significant main effect on *Comprehensibility* ($F(1, 37) < 1$). The interaction effect between *Idiomacity* and *Nativeness* was not statistically significant ($F(1, 37) < 1$).

The second ANOVA, which met the assumption of homogeneity of variance, did not find a significant main effect of *Idiomacity* on *Competence* ($F(1, 37) < 1$). *Nativeness* was also not found to have a significant main effect on *Competence* ($F(1, 37) < 1$). The interaction effect between *Idiomacity* and *Nativeness* was marginally significant ($F(1, 37) = 3.70, p = .062$).

Discussion

In this section, the results of this study are held against the light of the existing literature discussed previously. The current study aimed to investigate to what extent idiomatic

expressions influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting. The results indicate an answer to the research question of this study (“To what extent do idiomatic expressions in combination with the nativeness of the writer influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting?”). Neither the presence or absence of idioms nor the nativeness of the writer of the texts influenced the judgements by L2 speakers of English significantly. The results also did not show a significant effect of idioms or nativeness on the judgements by highly proficient L2 speakers of English. The study of Boers et al. (2006) showed that idioms do influence the judgements of L2 learners by natives positively. The hypothesis in this study was that this would be different for the judgements by L2 learners. No evidence was found in favor of the hypothesis.

It should be stated that the absence of evidence of the effects of idioms on the judgements by L2 learners in this study does not mean that idioms do not have an influence on the judgements. It might be that a different way of studying this relation might result in an effect. One of the reasons that this study did not find the relation between idioms and perceived competence, might be because of the way it was investigated. Boers et al. (2006) did find a positive relation between idioms and the perceived language proficiency of L2 speakers. In the study of Boers et al. (2006) the English of the students were evaluated by teachers. It is probable that teachers, who are trained in grading language proficiency of their students, come to more nuanced conclusions about a student’s English proficiency than students who have to evaluate someone’s English. Another reason for the different findings might be that the teachers in the study of Boers et al. (2006) filled in an assessment sheet with a scale from 0 to 20. This might bring more significant variations in the assessments than with a scale from 1 to 5. Moreover, the teachers in their study did not assess the competence and comprehensibility, but only the oral proficiency of the students. The assessment of this different characteristic might have brought different results than we have found in the current study. A last difference between the current study and the study of Boers et al. (2006) is the way the second language is presented. In the case of Boers et al. (2006) students had to perform an oral conversation. In the case of this study the English was transmitted through emails. It might be that English proficiency, professionalism and education level is easier to assess when someone is speaking than through written text.

The study of Cooper (1999) suggested that L2 learners are often at a loss to understand idiomatic expressions, which makes them a stumbling block in communication. However, the current study suggests that non-native speakers are able to comprehend idioms, since the

comprehensibility scores between the texts with idioms and the texts without idioms did not differ significantly. A reason for the different outcomes between the study of Cooper (1999) and the current study, might be that in the current study familiar English idioms were presented, while in the study of Cooper (1999) eight of the expressions were representative of standard English, eight were informal or colloquial in level of discourse, and four were slang expressions. The last two types of expressions might be unfamiliar to L2 learners, which might lead to a low level of comprehensibility of their meanings. Future research will be necessary to learn more about what the effects are of idiomatic expressions on the comprehensibility of L2 learners.

The current study also did not find an effect of the nativeness of the writer on the judgements by L2 learners. A reason for this might be that the participants did not notice the information about the nativeness of the writers. This was stated at the beginning of the questionnaire and the names of the writers, mentioned at the end of an email, were native or non-native. It might be that this information was not processed by the participants. Therefore, in a follow-up research the information about the nativeness should be made more explicit. For example, this could be done by presenting an oral conversation with native and non-native accents.

However, the results of this study do show a marginally significant interaction effect between the use of idioms and the nativeness of the writer for highly proficient L2 learners. Meaning that for native speakers the use of idioms has a positive effect on their perceived competence, while for non-natives the use of idioms has a negative effect on their perceived competence. A reason for this might be that the highly proficient L2 learners assume that a native uses an idiom correctly, while it is assumed that a non-native uses an idiom incorrectly. Vanlacker-Sidtis (2003) stated that more proficient L2 learners are better in discriminating between idiomatic and literal definitions of an idiom. This might explain why the interaction effect was lower when the less proficient L2 learners were included, as the less proficient learners might have taken an idiom literally, not noticing it was an idiom. This could lead to similar competence scores. For future research it might be advised to collect more data about highly proficient L2 learners, since there was almost a significant interaction effect in the current study.

With regard to other limitations of this study, there are a few things that need to be stated. Firstly, the number of participants that completed the questionnaire might have been too low to find a significant effect. The goal was to obtain at least twenty participants per

condition. This goal was not reached for the no-idioms – native condition, since only 18 participants were exposed to this condition. Secondly, it might be that the used emails were too easy to comprehend. Because of this, the participants filled in that the texts were very easy, clear and understandable regardless of if idioms or no idioms were used. This could be concluded from the relatively high means and low standard deviations for the *Comprehensibility* variable. So, the absence or presence of idioms could not change the answers of the participants because the texts were easy anyway. Furthermore, the selected idioms might have been too homogeneous in their level of familiarity. This could have made the texts with idioms relatively easy to understand for the participants. Finally, it might be that the scale used to measure the dependent variables was too small. A higher scale could have led to greater variation in the answers of the different participants.

The previous sections lead to a couple of recommendations that can be made for future research. A first recommendation might be to conduct a study with a more differentiated sample group. The current study focused mainly on Dutch University students, making the outcomes hard to generalize to every L2 speaker of English. Besides, on average the sample group had a high English proficiency level (LexTALE mean score of 79.25 out of 100). The study of Vanlacker-Sidtis (2003) found that different levels of English proficiency lead to different levels of comprehending idioms. Therefore, future research might try to find participants with more differentiated levels of English in order to find a possible effect of idiomaticity on comprehensibility and competence. Furthermore, it might be advisable to look into ways to study the relation between idioms and evaluation in an ELF setting with a within-subjects design. This type of design requires fewer participants to be able to find a relationship between variables. Moreover, if a participant was exposed to texts with idioms and without idioms, he might notice a difference and therefore have a different attitude towards the two versions. Eyckmans, Boers, and Stengers (2007) stated that L2 learners often do not notice that an idiom is being used. Reading a text with idioms shortly after reading a text without idioms might help L2 learners with noticing idiomatic expressions. Another recommendation might be to make sure that the used materials have a higher complexity than the ones we used in the current study. This might lead to the opportunity for the idioms to have an actual effect on the evaluations. Otherwise, participants will tend to evaluate the texts as being very comprehensible in every condition. This could be done by choosing to present less familiar idioms. Finally, it is advisable for future research to keep the questionnaire short,

in order to obtain reliable answers of the participants. Since, extensive questionnaires might lead to loss of concentration of participants.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study did not observe a relation between the use of idioms in combination with nativeness of the writer and the judgements of L2 speakers of English. The perceived comprehensibility of texts and the perceived competence of the writer were not influenced by the use of idioms or the nativeness of the writer according to the results. The absence of evidence does not mean that the use of idioms do not have an actual effect on the judgements within an ELF setting. Since the literature (Boers et al., 2006) has shown that this effect does exist outside of the ELF setting, we still think that this relation also exist within the ELF setting. Future research will be necessary to obtain more insights in idioms in an ELF context. This information might be of importance for L2 learners of English and companies that have English as their Lingua Franca.

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Appendix 1

Email 1 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

Email 1 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

Email 2 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

Email 2 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

Email 3 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

Email 3 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

Email 4 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

Email 4 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

Appendix 2

Statement of own work

Student name: Welmer Goudt

Student number: S1010518

PLAGIARISM is the presentation by a student of an assignment or piece of work which has in fact been copied in whole or in part from another student's work, or from any other source (e.g. published books or periodicals or material from Internet sites), without due acknowledgement in the text.

DECLARATION:

- a. I hereby declare that I am familiar with the faculty manual (<http://www.ru.nl/stip/english/rules-regulations/fraud-plagiarism/>) and with Article 16 "Fraud and plagiarism" in the Education and Examination Regulations for the Bachelor's programme of Communication and Information Studies.
- b. I also declare that I have only submitted text written in my own words
- c. I certify that this thesis is my own work and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation, whether they be books, articles, reports, lecture notes, and any other kind of document, electronic or personal communication.

Signature: _____

Place and date: 02-06-2020