

***Hold your horses! It's a piece of cake!* Analyzing the effect of idiomatic expressions on L2 learners' evaluations of writers and texts in an ELF setting**



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Abstract

Idiomatic expressions, such as *have a go* or *out of the blue*, belong to a special part of language. They are frequently used in everyday communication by native speakers; however, studies have shown that non-native speakers tend to have difficulty processing and understanding them (Cooper, 1999; Ellis, Simpson-Vlach & Maynard, 2008; Van Lancker Tidits, 2003). When interlocutors do not share the same first language in intercultural communication and the business world, English is often used as a lingua franca (ELF). Nevertheless, idioms have not received a lot of attention in the research field of ELF, even though they could help non-native speakers to come across as more fluent and native-like (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers & Demecheleer, 2016; Thyab, 2016). Because of this research gap, the current study investigated whether the use of idiomatic expressions in written communication influenced the way non-native speakers of English evaluate the competence of the writer as well as the comprehensibility of the text in an ELF setting. Furthermore, we were interested in whether there was a difference in evaluation when the writer was supposedly a native or non-native English speaker. A between-subjects design experiment was performed in which 85 native speakers of Dutch were asked to evaluate four business related emails and their authors, containing idioms or their literal translations, signed with a native or non-native sounding name. Our results showed no significant difference between the evaluation of comprehensibility whether idioms were used or not. There was also no significant difference found for the evaluation of competence when idioms were used or not by either a native or non-native writer. The absence of significant results suggests that idioms do not have a significant influence on non-native speakers' evaluation of writers. Ultimately, the lack of significant outcomes could indicate that there is no effect or that it was not successfully confirmed by this study. Further research is needed to clarify the issue.

Introduction

As a result of globalization, the world has come to a state of constant interconnectedness (Vettorel, 2014, p.xxi). Hence, in the business world, being able to communicate professionally and effectively is of great benefit. Since a large part of the world population has a different mother tongue and therefore speaks English as a second language, it is relevant to look into how these speakers' language use differs from the way native speakers communicate. The use of the English language as a common means of communication (or

contact language) for speakers of different native languages is the definition of the term English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Nordquist, 2019).

Out of more than 7000 languages represented in the world today, English ranks as the most spoken one (Ghosh, 2020). The prevalence of the English language expands to the Internet, making it by far the most represented language on the World Wide Web (*Top Ten Internet Languages in The World—Internet Statistics*, n.d.). According to Crystal (2003), the number of people in the world who speak English as a second language outweighs the number of native speakers by 3 to 1. This means that one is more likely to have an English conversation with a non-native speaker than with a native speaker, creating an ELF setting in which the English language is a unifying bridge between the interlocutors.

Therefore, ELF is an extremely common phenomenon which has been proven worthwhile to investigate (Cogo, 2011; Crystal, 2003; Kaur, 2011). One aspect that has not been researched extensively in ELF context is the use of idiomatic expressions, even though they take up a significant part of the English language and are significant in everyday communication for native speakers. Idiomatic expressions can be defined as “a string of two or more words for which meaning is not derived from the meanings of the individual words comprising that string” (Swinney & Cutler, 1979, p.523). Examples of such expressions are “to spill the beans” (reveal or make known something that has been kept secret), “it’s raining cats and dogs!” (it’s raining heavily!) and “break a leg!” (good luck!). These type of expressions are quite common in everyday communication for native speakers (Van Lancker Sidtis, 2003), however, second language (L2) learners seem to have trouble understanding and using them because their meaning cannot be derived from the words comprising them (Cooper, 1999; Ellis et al., 2008; Van Lancker Sidtis, 2003). Meanwhile, it has also been found that L2 learners of English do not show a difference in processing idiomatic expressions compared to native speakers (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). Further studies have looked at ELF from a different angle, namely the way L2 learners of English actually use idioms in intercultural communication, concluding that non-native speakers tend to use idiomatic expressions on their own terms, which does not necessarily match native speakers’ customs (Franceschi, 2013; Seidlhofer, 2009).

However, using idioms correctly would be highly beneficial for L2 learners because this can help them come across as more proficient and native-like (Boers et al., 2016; Thyab, 2016). Therefore, paying attention to using them in a professional environment could lead to an increase of one’s perceived competence.

In the current ELF field of research, idiomatic expressions have not received much attention. Up to now, studies have looked into students' evaluations of native compared to non-native speaking teachers (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Üstünlüoğlu, 2007). However, in terms of a working environment, further research is needed in exploring the way native and non-native speakers of English are perceived and what part the use of idiomatic expressions plays in this matter. Further investigation into how a non-native speaker of English can come across competently and understandably is of great importance in order to facilitate the communication processes across multinational organizations worldwide. Idiomatic expressions are a common phenomenon in the English language, which makes it relevant to look into in an ELF business context. Up to now, it is still unclear how idioms are perceived by non-native speakers and whether this could have a positive or negative effect on understandability of a text and the perceived expertise of the writer. Therefore, this study will combine these two factors and focus on how business emails written by native and non-native English-speaking managers are evaluated regarding the comprehensibility of the text as well as the competence of the writer based on the presence or absence of idiomatic expressions. This research will lead to relevant insights for the academic world as well as the business world. Should the emails containing idioms be evaluated as more comprehensible and the writer as more competent, it would be important for non-native supervisors to pay attention to adapt their communication strategy accordingly when engaging with their employees. This would allow communication to run more smoothly and to establish a sense of professionalism, as well as to prevent misunderstandings. Before we dive into the study, we will first discuss the theoretical framework to give a proper overview of the findings that have already been reported.

Theoretical Framework

In an ELF context, misunderstandings and ambiguity are common, due to the different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the speakers (Kaur, 2011). According to Kaur (2011) this raises a need for explicitness and self-repair. However, the goal of these type of conversations is mutual understanding rather than perfection, indicating that the parties involved consider it more important to produce intelligible and comprehensible speech rather than strive to meet native speaker standards. Cogo (2011) also investigated the strategic use of ELF and discovered that when there is a misunderstanding, the speakers tend to try to fix it in their mother tongue rather than English, even if they do not share the same first language.

Furthermore, when an idiomatic expression (e.g. *to be in the same boat*) was uttered in an ELF conversation between speakers of different language and cultural backgrounds and there was any doubt about the exact wordings, creativity and playfulness were used to establish the fact that all of them were foreign and therefore in the same group. In other words, it is no problem if one of them makes a mistake, because they all speak English as a second language and are thus not on the same level as native speakers; there is mutual understanding on this aspect.

Considering the figurative nature of idiomatic expressions, they often form obstacles for English Second Language (ESL) learners since they are part of a special aspect of language (Cooper, 1999; Ellis et al., 2008; Van Lancker Sidtis, 2003). Research has shown that L2 speakers tend to overlook idiomatic expressions in a text and have difficulty processing them. For instance, Ellis et al. (2008) found that non-native speakers of English have more difficulty learning and noticing this type of expressions. Even after intensive training, they still do not process idioms the same way as native speakers do, indicating that it takes them more time to understand these expressions and their meaning. This is in line with Van Lancker Sidtis (2003) who observed that L2 learners had more trouble indicating whether an utterance should be considered literally or whether there was a meaning to it that could not be deduced from the actual words. These results correspond to the findings of Cooper (1999). He noticed that L2 speakers tend to experience more difficulty in processing idiomatic expressions than native speakers, which leads to misunderstandings, for instance when a conversation is centered around an idiom that they do not comprehend.

Others, however, have found conflicting evidence that non-native English speakers do not experience difficulty processing or identifying idioms (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008). For instance, Conklin and Schmitt (2008) report that formulaic language such as idiomatic expressions are processed faster than nonformulaic language by native as well as non-native speakers, and also considered equally difficult to understand as normal speech. This could indicate that L2 learners find it easier to deal with idiomatic expressions than with their literal translations, nevertheless, further research is necessary to explore this topic and to allow us to make valid assumptions.

Furthermore, it can be argued that ESL speakers do actually include idioms in their speech (Franceschi, 2013; Seidlhofer, 2009). While the studies above all addressed idiomatic expressions in speakers of English as a second language, Seidlhofer (2009) took a different approach and investigated idioms in the context of ELF specifically. She discovered that ELF speakers use the idiom principle to communicate effectively. This means that they use pre-

constructed phrases (i.e. idioms) which prevent them from having to construct meanings. The expressions do not necessarily have to correspond with the ones that native (L1) speakers use. ELF situations allow for their own terms given the fact that the conversation does not have to meet native speaker standards (Seidlhofer, 2009). Similar results have been described by Franceschi (2013), namely that ELF speakers do not avoid using idiomatic expressions in multicultural communication. They rather use them on their own terms, by making up temporary idioms to serve the purpose required by the conversation at that moment. Nevertheless, ELF speakers show to be aware of the possibility of misunderstandings and problems with intelligibility (Franceschi, 2013). These results state that non-native speakers of English are likely to use idioms in ELF situations, one way or another.

Besides the question whether L2 speakers of English have trouble understanding and including idiomatic expressions in their language use or not, it can also be argued that L2 speakers who include idiomatic expressions in their speech are evaluated as more fluent and native-like than ESL learners who avoid them (Boers et al., 2016; Thyab, 2016). According to Thyab (2016), emphasizing the importance of teaching idiomatic expressions to L2 learners of English can help them gain a better understanding of the culture and customs of the language, as well as becoming more fluent and sounding more native-like. This conclusion is in line with the study by Boers et al. (2016), who discovered that the correct use of formulaic language (such as collocations and idiomatic expressions) can help L2 learners come across as more proficient speakers during interviews with L1 speakers. Combining the findings of Thyab (2016) and Boers et al. (2016), it can be concluded that the use of idiomatic expressions during interviews may lead to a more positive evaluation of the speaker than when idioms are avoided. The evidence of a positive effect of the use of idioms was especially reliable for the perception of the L2 speaker's fluency and range of expression (Boers et al., 2016). To put it differently, the use of idiomatic expressions made the L2 speakers come across as more fluent and able to express themselves better than those who do not include them in their speech, as evaluated by native speakers. The findings by Thyab (2016) and Boers et al. (2016) show that L2 speakers of English come across as more fluent and native-like to L1 speakers when they include idiomatic expressions in their speech. The question remains to what extent this also holds for an ELF setting in which both speakers and listeners are L2 speakers of English.

Speaking of ELF situations, two studies have been conducted regarding the way L2 learners of English evaluate native teachers compared to non-native teachers (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Üstünlüoğlu, 2007). Both of these studies were focused on university students

evaluating native and non-native teachers of English. Üstünlüoğlu (2007) focused her research on Turkish students at the Izmir University of Economics who evaluated native teachers of English (NTE) compared to Turkish non-native teachers of English (NNTTE) that studied the English language in Turkey. Her results showed that the students perceived the NTEs to be more skilled at communicating and possessing more attractive individual features, whereas NNTTEs were appreciated for their teaching and management roles because they had experience with learning English as a second language. Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) looked at how students from the University of the Basque Country evaluated native speaker teachers (NST) and non-native speaker teachers (NNTTE) of English. Their results were somewhat deviating from the results by Üstünlüoğlu (2007), stating that even though there were students who preferred being taught by a combination of NSTs and NNTTEs, the majority of the participants reported a preference for native teachers. These conflicting results raise the question whether L2 students evaluate non-native teachers in a more negative or rather more positive way compared to native teachers.

To sum up, in the field of ELF there has not been a lot of research regarding the use of idiomatic expressions and whether using them in a text makes it easier or more difficult for L2 learners to understand. Conklin and Schmitt (2008) as well as Franceschi (2013) and Seidlhofer (2009) have observed that non-native speakers do not experience more difficulty understanding and using figurative versus literal speech, however, others have concluded that L2 learners do have more trouble understanding and using idioms (Cooper, 1999; Ellis et al., 2008; Van Lancker Sidtis, 2003). More research needs to be done concerning the fact that using idiomatic expressions can help non-native speakers come across as more fluent and native-like to other non-native speakers, since previous research was only focused on native speaker evaluations of L2 learners (Boers et al., 2016). Furthermore, studies have shown mixed results with respect to the evaluation of native and non-native teachers of English (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Üstünlüoğlu, 2007). Previous research has not yet found clear answers in regard to the use of idioms in a business setting. In addition, the tasks were not representative of real-life communication in companies. It is important to find out more about the influence of idioms in ELF business communication, in order to know whether to avoid or use them when wanting to come across understandably and professionally as a manager. In the present study, we were interested in how the use of idiomatic expressions in business communication between managers and their employees can either facilitate or hinder L2 speakers' comprehension of texts written by assumed native or non-native speakers. In other words, we wanted to find out if the use of idioms in business communication can help non-

native English-speaking employees better understand written texts provided by their supervisors. Furthermore, we aimed to find out whether a manager or supervisor will be considered more competent or professional when idiomatic expressions are used and what role the status of the writer (native or non-native speaker) has in this evaluation. In addition, coming across as professional and competent will help managers to achieve a better reputation among their employees and avoid situations where the manager's lack of language skills could lead to unsuccessful communication. Using idiomatic expressions could possibly lend a hand in this respect, which is what we intended to find out by conducting this study. We aimed to find an answer to the following research question: To what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting?

This question was divided into two parts, namely:

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

Since time is highly valuable in the business world, and globalization has led to international trade being more important than ever, leading to the rise of virtual teams, it is of great importance for managers and others in "teaching" positions to communicate as clearly and comprehensible as possible in order to prevent misunderstandings and ambiguity.

The outcomes of this study could prove to be relevant in terms of intercultural communication, as well as for business contexts. Managers and other executives could benefit from the results of our study. For example, if we find that the texts including idioms are evaluated as more comprehensible and the writer as more competent, it could encourage their application in business communication. In terms of speaker status, you are either born a native speaker or you are not. However, one can try their best to come across as more fluent and native-like. The current study could offer useful insights in this respect, causing non-native speakers to be evaluated as well-matched to native speakers. Furthermore, the outcomes of this study could present valuable new insights regarding the way one should communicate with L2 speakers in order for the message to come across clearly and comprehensible, i.e. using idiomatic expressions or transform their meanings into literal utterances.

Method

Materials

The stimulus material consisted of 4 emails written from a manager's point of view, about different subjects such as a business trip or a new office opening soon. These emails were composed for the purpose of this study, however, two Canadian native speakers of English checked them for mistakes since they were written by L2 speakers of English. In order to operationalize our two independent variables, idiomaticity and writer, there were four conditions for each email. Two of the versions contained idiomatic expressions, one of which was signed with an English sounding name and the other with a Dutch-sounding name. In the other two versions the idioms were replaced by their literal meaning, and one was signed with an English-sounding name (e.g. Anne Miller) and the other one with a Dutch-sounding name (e.g. Oscar Groen). Signing the emails with native or non-native sounding names was done for the purpose of manipulating our participants into believing that the email was actually written by a native or non-native speaker. In order to maintain equal representation, two of the emails were supposedly written by a typical female name, whereas the other two emails were signed with a typical male name. The emails were all approximately 10 lines long and each of them contained 5 idiomatic expressions or their translations. Idioms were selected from the database that was created by Beck and Weber (2016), which contains English idioms that are rated by native speakers on various idiom properties such as idiom familiarity and frequency. To ensure that our participants were familiar with the idioms, we selected only idioms with an L1 familiarity rating higher than 6. Doing this helped us make the emails appear more realistic, since it is likely that common expressions rather than rare expressions will be used in business communication. Furthermore, each of the idioms was used only once, to avoid the participants finding out the goal of the research. The emails can be found in the appendix, where we clearly indicated which idioms were used, what their familiarity ratings were, and their location in the text.

Subjects

A total of 87 persons completed our study. Each participant identified themselves as being of either the female or male gender, 48 of them (55.2%) indicated to be female, and 39 of them (44.8%) declared to belong to the male gender. The average age of the participants was 22.04 ($SD= 2.09$) years, with the range being 11 years since the youngest participant was 18 years and the oldest 29 years. However, seven subjects (8.2%) stated that they were over 30 years

of age but did not mention an exact age. Therefore, they were not included in this calculation of the mean age. Regarding their mother tongue, 85 of our participants indicated this to be Dutch, whereas two of them filled in Turkish or Indonesian. The mean self-estimation of their English level was 7.38 ($SD=1.08$) on a scale of 1 being the poorest and 10 the best. The range was 5, since the lowest score was 5 and the highest score was 10. Every participant completed a LexTALE (Lexical Test for Advanced Learners of English) test to measure their level of English vocabulary knowledge (Lemhöfer & Boersma, 2012). The mean score for this test was 78.64 out of 100 ($SD=12.75$, range 48.75-100). Almost every participant, namely 80 of them, stated that their level of Dutch was higher than their level of English. Thirty-eight participants indicated to be enrolled in an English-taught program (47.5%) and 34 of our participants were in the third year of their bachelor's program (42.5%). In Table 1 below the distribution of the participants' level of education is displayed.

Table 1. Distribution of the participants over different academic years including Frequency and Percent

	Frequency	Percent
Bachelor 1	7	8,0
Bachelor 2	3	3,4
Bachelor 3	34	39,1
Master 1	11	12,6
Master 2	6	6,9
Other	26	29,9
Total	87	100,0

Design

The subjects participating in this study were exposed to one level of the independent variables each, indicating a 2x2 between-subjects design. The independent variables in this study are writer, with levels native and non-native, and idiomaticity, with levels idioms present and idioms absent. They were operationalized by exposing our participants to a total of 4 texts, divided over 4 conditions. The first condition entailed that the participants were exposed to four emails containing idioms that were supposedly written by a native speaker. The second condition included the four emails that also contained idioms but signed by a non-native writer's name. The third condition exposed the participants to four emails without idioms that possessed the native writer characteristic. The fourth condition related to the participants reading the emails without idioms and signed by the non-native sounding names. A between-subjects design was preferable to a within-subjects design since we decided to administer our questionnaire online and it would be time-consuming for the participants to read and evaluate 16 emails. Therefore, exposing our participants to all levels of the independent variables would have likely led to a high dropout rate.

Instruments

The dependent variables (comprehensibility and competence) were measured by asking the participants 6 questions, 3 for comprehensibility and 3 for competence. First, to measure comprehensibility of the text, 5-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree were used to ask our participants about their perception of the email. The statements were: The text is easy to read; It is clear what the text is about; I understood the text. The reliability of "comprehensibility" comprising three items was good: $\alpha = .85$. Consequently, the mean for all three items was used to calculate the compound variable "comprehensibility" which was used in the further analyses. Subsequently, participants were asked to evaluate the competence of the writer of the email based on three 5-point semantic differential scale questions: Unprofessional—Professional, Uneducated—Educated, Not proficient—Proficient. These questions were inspired by the method that Nejari, Gerritsen, van Hout and Planken (2020) used to investigate L2 English speaker's understanding and attitude towards foreign accents and native accents. The reliability of "competence" comprising three items was good: $\alpha = .89$. Consequently, the mean for all three items was used to calculate the compound variable "competence" which was used in the further analyses.

Procedure

The subjects were recruited through social media as well as via phone calls and personal contact. We did not offer them any sort of incentive; therefore, they did not experience personal benefit from their participation. However, since we knew most of the participants personally, we could motivate them to take part with the pretense that it would help us graduate and therefore it would make us very grateful. The participants were informed that the study was about how Dutch students evaluate English emails. Furthermore, the questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics (*Qualtrics XM // The Leading Experience Management Software*, n.d.), individually and consisted of two parts. After giving their consent to the recording of their information and agreeing to participate in the study, participants were exposed to instructions telling them explicitly that the emails were either written by native or non-native speakers of English (depending on the experimental condition that they were assigned to). Subsequently, they were redirected to the first part of the questionnaire. This section was focused on gathering background information, namely the participants' gender, age, level of education, if they are enrolled in an English-taught program, if their mother tongue is Dutch or other, their estimation of their level of English and whether their English is better than their Dutch. Should the participant have indicated to be younger than 16 years of age, they would have been redirected to the end of the questionnaire since using their data would be unethical. Afterwards, they were given a brief instruction again, re-emphasizing the native or non-native status of the writer. Both sets of instructions can be found in the appendix. The second part of the survey concerned the actual experiment, meaning the emails and the questions regarding the writer and the text itself. After every text, the same questions were asked in the same order, first the three statements regarding comprehensibility (The text is easy to read; It is clear what the text is about; I understood the text) followed by the three semantic differential scale questions about the writer's competence (Unprofessional—Professional, Uneducated—Educated, Not proficient—Proficient). At the top of the page we included the writer's name again in the following statement: Please rate the email by miss/mister (last name) on the following traits. This was done to emphasize the native or non-native status of the writer again. Before exposing our participants to the competence questions, this statement was changed to: Please rate miss/mister (last name) on the following traits. To prevent certain texts receiving the same answers based on the concentration of the participant or any other factor, the order in which the emails were presented to the participants was randomized. When they started answering the questions, they could not scroll back to the text to read it again. The

participants were able to complete the questionnaire on either a smartphone, tablet, laptop or any other similar device in order to increase participation. For each participant, the procedure was identical. After finishing the questionnaire, participants were asked to complete an online LexTALE (Lexical Test for Advanced Learners of English) English vocabulary test.

Lemhöfer & Broersma (2012) have found that this test provides a more accurate overview of proficiency than self-evaluation. Furthermore, this test only takes about 3.5 minutes, making it an excellent option for our study. This quick lexical decision task provided us with an unbiased indication of their English proficiency. At the end of the questionnaire, we debriefed our participants on the true aim of the study and included an email address that they could contact should they have any questions. The completion of the experiment took 758 seconds (12.63 minutes) on average ($SD= 545.15$, range 183-2811).

Statistical Treatment

The outcomes of this study were subjected to statistical treatment. The appropriate test for this design is a two-way univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA). Since this study has two dependent variables (competence and comprehensibility) and two independent variables (writer and idiomaticity), we needed to perform two two-way univariate analyses of variance. One analysis to test the effect of idiomaticity and writer on comprehensibility and one analysis to test the effects of idiomaticity and writer on competence. Both of the independent variables are between-subjects variables.

Results

Five of the participants completed the questionnaire either in an overly short or overly long period of time. Four participants took longer than 3000 seconds (50 minutes) to complete the questionnaire, whereas one participant completed the questionnaire in merely 183 seconds (3 minutes). However, after careful consideration, their answers seemed reliable and therefore we decided to include them in our statistical analyses. Nevertheless, they were excluded of the calculation of the mean duration in order to give a representative number. A possible explanation for these extreme scores could be that the participants were distracted during the completion of the questionnaire, went to do something else, and therefore needed more time. As for the participant who completed the questionnaire very quickly, they were probably in a hurry and wanted to finish as soon as possible. In addition, they might have been able to read and process the texts more quickly than the average participant.

Furthermore, two of the participants stated that their mother tongue was not Dutch, but in fact Indonesian and Turkish respectively. We decided to remove them from our data for the statistical treatment as to make sure we could make claims for persons who state their mother tongue to be Dutch. This means that we were left with 85 participants. Twenty-six of them were exposed to the first condition: emails with idiomatic expressions that were supposedly written by a native English speaker. Twenty-one participants were exposed to the second condition: emails with idioms, signed by a non-native sounding name. Eighteen participants completed the questionnaire in the third condition: emails that were supposedly written by a native English speaker, with the literal translation of the idioms. Lastly, 20 participants belonged to the fourth condition and read emails that had the literal translation of the idioms and were signed by an English-sounding (native) name.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) for the comprehensibility and competence of e-mails in function of idiomaticity and native or non-native writer after excluding the two participants with a different mother tongue (1 = very low comprehensibility / competence, 5 = very high comprehensibility / competence)

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

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for each condition. It is worth noting that there is merely a small difference between the values for the idioms and no idioms conditions. What is striking is that the scores for the conditions without idioms are even slightly higher than the scores for the conditions including idioms. A two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity and writer as factors showed no significant main effect of use of idioms on comprehensibility ($F(1,81)= 1.04, p=.310$). Native or non-native writer was also not found to have a significant main effect on comprehensibility ($F(1,81) < 1$). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and writer was also not statistically significant ($F(1,81) < 1$). Regarding the effect of idiomaticity and writer on competence, we also executed a two-way analysis of variance with use of idioms or no idioms (idiomaticity) and native or non-native writer (writer) as factors. The test did not show a significant main effect for use of idioms on competence ($F(1,81)=1.77, p=.188$). Native or non-native writer also showed no significant main effect on competence ($F(1,81) < 1$). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and writer was not significant either ($F(1,81) < 1$).

Because the statistical treatment did not show significant results, it was decided to exclude all participants with a LexTALE score below 80 and run the two-way analysis of variance again. This decision was made in order to investigate whether the participants with a high English proficiency, and therefore a better understanding of the texts, did evaluate the emails and writers differently when idioms were used or not. Boers et al. (2016) had namely found that native speakers do value idioms, and participants with a higher proficiency are closer to native speaker level than those with a lower ability. There were 41 participants who had a LexTALE score of 80 or higher, 13 in the native with idioms condition, 6 in the non-native with idioms condition, and 11 for both the native and non-native conditions that did not contain idioms. The means and standard deviations for all conditions can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) for the comprehensibility and competence of e-mails in function of idiomaticity and native or non-native writer (1 = very low comprehensibility / competence, 5 = very high comprehensibility / competence) including the participants with a LexTALE score higher than 80

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

This time, the two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity and writer as factors did not show a significant main effect of idiomaticity on comprehensibility ($F(1,37) < 1$). Writer did not have a significant main effect on comprehensibility either ($F(1,37) < 1$). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and writer was also not statistically significant ($F(1,37) < 1$). As for competence, the two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity and writer as factors did not show a significant main effect of use of idiomaticity on competence ($F(1,37) < 1$) and neither for writer ($F(1,37) < 1$). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and writer was also not statistically significant in this case ($F(1,37) = 3.70, p=.062$).

Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to examine whether the use of idiomatic expressions in an email written by a non-native speaker of English could cause them to be evaluated as more competent by other non-native speakers as well as whether the email is evaluated as being more comprehensible when idioms are used compared to when they are replaced by a literal translation. The research questions (1. To what extent do L2 speakers of English evaluate the presence of idiomatic expressions as making a text more comprehensible and the writer more competent than the absence of idiomatic expressions? 2. To what extent is there a difference in the effect of idiomatic expressions on the evaluation of the text and writer when the writer is assumed to be a non-native speaker compared to a native speaker?) were addressed by performing several statistical analyses.

However, none of the results from statistical treatment have found significant effects. This means that our study has not found evidence that non-native speakers of English evaluate texts containing idiomatic expressions as more comprehensible and the writer as more competent. Furthermore, the findings do not prove that the emails with or without idiomatic expressions were evaluated differently when the writer is either assumed to be a native or non-native speaker. In the end, this does not mean that there is no effect; it simply indicates that our study did not conclude in any statistically significant difference.

It is surprising that we did not confirm the effect of idioms on comprehensibility of the text because Cooper (1999) did find that L2 speakers of English tend to have more trouble understanding idioms than literal speech. However, he looked at spoken language rather than written. The task that participants had to carry out also differs from our way of researching, because they were asked to guess the meaning of the idiomatic expression from a written context. In our study, we did not measure whether our participants were able to provide the meanings of the idioms used.

The studies by Van Lancker Sidtis (2003) and Ellis et al. (2008) also deviate from our study in that they focused on ESL learners' competences regarding idiomatic language in speech, through listening or speaking. Van Lancker Sidtis (2003) exposed her participants to spoken sentences containing either figurative (i.e. idioms) or literal language and found that non-native speakers had more trouble indicating whether the utterance was supposed to be taken literally or if it had a meaning beyond that of the individual words. In regard to Ellis et al. (2008), the subjects were given the task to assess whether strings of letters contained actual English expressions or not, by reading them out loud and pressing 'yes' or 'no' on a

computer. Non-native speakers tended to have significantly more difficulty with this assignment than native speakers. In applying these results to our study, it is possible that our participants were not aware of the idioms and their meanings, justifying why there was no difference between the versions with idioms and the versions with the literal translations.

Nonetheless, the findings by Conklin and Schmitt (2008) were based on the reading abilities of L2 learners and found that idioms were processed faster and regarded as equally difficult to comprehend as normal speech. This is in line with our own findings, namely that there was no difference in the way the emails with idiomatic language and the emails with literal language were evaluated regarding their comprehensibility.

As for competence, our outcomes diverge from those reported by Thyab (2016) and Boers et al. (2016) with respect to non-native speaker evaluations. Both of these studies argue that using idioms in speech can help L2 learners of English come across as more fluent and native-like, while in our study we did not find such an effect. A possible reason for these deviating results could be that they also centered their research around spoken language rather than written language. Moreover, in Boers et al. (2016) the ESL learners are evaluated by native speakers, instead of other L2 speakers like in our study. It is possible that there is a difference in the way native and non-native speakers evaluate competence in written and spoken language, which needs more attention in the field of ELF in order to be clarified.

Furthermore, our results align with Üstünlüoğlu (2007) who explained that native and non-native teachers are both appreciated for different reasons. Perhaps the participants of our study showed equal scores for competence for both the native and non-native writers, because they would appreciate both of them equally as managers. In both the native and non-native conditions, our writers were evaluated rather positively, which matches the findings by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002), namely that a part of their participants preferred to be taught by not just native teachers, but a combination of native as well as non-native teachers.

Firstly, a possible limitation to this study could be that the materials were inadequate, as we have received feedback by some participants that the emails were inconsistent in quality. Some emails were considered easier to read when the idioms were well spread over the text, whereas other emails displayed the idioms without enough distance between them. This could be attributed to the fact that the four emails were all created by different writers. Even though the emails were checked by two Canadian native speakers of English, it may have been better to let them rewrite the emails. It is possible that the participants were familiar with the style of English written by Dutch speakers and that this skewed the results even despite the name change.

Secondly, another possible limitation could have been that we only took into account the L1 familiarity rating and did not pay as much attention to the L2 evaluation of the idioms when composing the emails. This could have led to a lower comprehensibility evaluation in case the subjects did not know the meanings of the idioms. For example, the idiom “Draw a blank” was attributed a mean score of 6.73 by native speakers, whereas the ESL learners only granted a mean rating of 3.25. The slightly higher scores for the emails without idioms could be explained by this fact, because maybe some of the idioms were not familiar enough for our participants and caused for a lower understanding of the text and perhaps a lower evaluation of the writer as well.

One aspect that cannot have been problematic is the operationalization of the dependent variables, comprehensibility and competence, since all Cronbach’s Alpha’s were good. Still, another possible limitation could be that the results would have been different if the participants were exposed to all four conditions, i.e. if our design would have been within subjects instead of between subjects. It would not have been realistic if our subjects were asked to read 16 emails, given that it would take them a long time to complete the survey and they were not compensated for their participation.

For future research regarding the evaluation of idioms in written communication in ELF settings, it could be valuable to expand the sample to a different, larger or more diverse target group of participants, considering the fact that our study only related to 87 Dutch students with a relatively high average of English proficiency. For instance, investigating how working people (who speak English as a second language) evaluate emails with and without idiomatic expressions written by native versus non-native writers could offer interesting insights for ELF communication within the business world. Speaking of students, extending the target group from university students to HBO (Higher Vocational Education), MBO (Intermediate Vocational Education) and pre-master students, could deliver a more profound insight. They likely all have a different vision of work processes and communication styles between manager and employee. This would give us a wider overview of the real workplace, since this would probably include staff members from different educational backgrounds and therefore different levels of English proficiency as well as different perceptions on communication. In short, a bigger spread of English proficiency among participants is needed in future studies.

Another interesting area of additional research would be to focus on speakers of different mother tongues, because the present study only took into consideration Dutch native speakers. Perhaps ESL learners from Russian, Brazilian, or Chinese descent would show

different ratings, regarding the fact that they come from entirely different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and might have a different take on the concepts of comprehensibility and competence and the role of idioms in this matter. One aspect that these cultures all have in common, is that they have a rather high score on the Power Distance dimension by Hofstede (2001). This means that there is a big gap between the employees and manager, and communication takes place in a more formal and less direct manner than in the Netherlands, which scores rather low on this dimension. Because of this difference in superior-subordinate relationships and therefore the way communication takes place among employees of these cultures, it could mean that they have a different perception of idioms and whether they should be used by a competent speaker/writer or not. Comparing their evaluations to those of Dutch participants, or any other country with less strict hierarchical ties, is a thought-provoking opportunity.

Lastly, to come back to earlier studies that have found differences regarding evaluation of idioms compared to literal speech in spoken language (Boers et al., 2016; Thyab, 2016), it could be useful to implement this again for future research. Furthermore, in order to find out whether non-native speakers are aware of idioms being used, like Van Lancker Sidtis (2003) also described, asking them questions regarding the meanings of the idioms might be a suitable option. However, this might be more applicable for a within-subjects design, because this would allow the researcher to compare the results for the idioms and no idioms versions for each participant.

In addition, besides the literal meanings of the idioms, it could be interesting to investigate what sort of associations are evoked by idioms in the minds of L2 speakers. Perhaps idiomatic expressions are not considered appropriate for formal business communication, but rather suitable for a more “casual” context. Therefore, it is possible that idioms in business are not perceived as professional regardless of whether one has a high level of English or not. Additional research is needed to address this issue.

Conclusion

In the end, this study demonstrated that business-type emails with idioms were not evaluated to be different by way of comprehensibility and competence than those without. This was also the case for the emails with a supposedly native or non-native writer, they were also not rated differently. Therefore, in answer to our research questions (1. To what extent do L2 speakers of English evaluate the presence of idiomatic expressions as making a text more comprehensible and the writer more competent than the absence of idiomatic expressions? 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?) there is no statistically significant difference between evaluations. Additional research is necessary to confirm whether there is an effect of idioms on evaluation of comprehensibility of texts and competence of writers and if so, whether this is positive or negative. Several extenuating conclusions from the study resulted as well. Firstly, based on our participants' evaluations, both native and non-native writers were rated fairly positively. This could indicate that regardless of idioms were used or not, both native and non-native managers/supervisors/others with a "teaching" role are appreciated equally among non-native speakers. Furthermore, the absence of significant results could indicate that the effect is non-existent; meaning that idiomatic expressions do not have an influence on the degree of difficulty that L2 speakers experience when reading an English text. Supplementary research is needed in order to find out whether idiomatic expressions have an effect on evaluated comprehensibility of texts and competence of writers. In conclusion, to ESL learners: no need to *get the blues*, you might still come across as a competent writer creating understandable texts whether you have an extended knowledge of idiomatic expressions or not.

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Appendix 1: emails

Idiom overview

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Schedule a monthly meeting (explain why and for what purpose)

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

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

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

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

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

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: instructions and debriefing

Instructions before background questions

1. Version for native speaker texts

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in our study. This experiment will consist of three parts. First we will ask you to fill out some general questions about your background. After these questions the experiment will begin, you will be asked to read 4 e-mails from a business context and you will be asked to evaluate these e-mails and their writers. The e-mails you will be reading are **written by native speakers of English**. Once you have completed the questionnaire about these e-mails, a vocabulary test will be administered to give us an indication of your English proficiency. In total, this will take about 15 minutes to complete.

We are Guusje, Lydia, Jana, Loes and Welmer and we are currently in our third year of the IBC program at Radboud University. The data collected through this experiment will be used for Bachelor thesis purposes only. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact the supervisors Ferdy Hubers or Lotte Hogeweg.

2. Version for non-native speaker texts

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in our study. This experiment will consist of three parts. First we will ask you to fill out some general questions about your background. After these questions the experiment will begin, you will be asked to read 4 e-mails from a business context and you will be asked to evaluate these e-mails and their writers. The e-mails you will be reading are **written by non-native speakers of English**. Once you have completed the questionnaire about these e-mails, a vocabulary test will be administered to give us an indication of your English proficiency. In total, this will take about 15 minutes to complete.

We are Guusje, Lydia, Jana, Loes and Welmer and we are currently in our third year of the IBC program at Radboud University. The data collected through this experiment will be used for Bachelor thesis purposes only. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact the supervisors Ferdy Hubers or Lotte Hogeweg.

Instructions after background questions

3. Version for native speaker texts

The experiment will now begin. You will be shown 4 different e-mails, each followed by 6 questions about the text and the writer. These texts are all written by **native speakers of English**. Keep in mind that the text will disappear when you proceed to the questions, so read carefully.

4. Version for non-native speaker texts

The experiment will now begin. You will be shown 4 different e-mails, each followed by 6 questions about the text and the writer. These texts are all written by **non-native speakers of English**. Keep in mind that the text will disappear when you proceed to the questions, so read carefully.

Debriefing

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in our study, we really appreciate your input. This study aims to investigate the effect of the presence of idiomatic language (the use of expressions) in business related emails on the evaluation of the comprehensibility of the text and competence of the writer. In addition to this we aim to find whether native or non-native writers are evaluated differently. The emails as well as the writers are all made up and were written by non-native speakers of English for the purpose of this study. If you wish to be notified of the results of this study, please contact:

Kind regards,

Lydia, Loes, Jana, Welmer and Guusje

Appendix 3: background questions

1. What is your age?
 - Drop-down list ranging from Younger than 16 – Older than 30

2. What gender do you identify with?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other

3. What academic year are you in?
 - Bachelor 1 (propaedeutic phase)
 - Bachelor 2
 - Bachelor 3
 - Master 1
 - Master 2
 - Other (type in individually)

4. Are you enrolled in an English-taught programme?
 - Yes
 - No

5. Is your mother tongue Dutch?
 - Yes
 - No (fill in what language)

6. Your estimation of your level in English (1 = almost nothing, 10 = perfect/native) :
_____(drop-down list 1-10)

7. My English is better than my Dutch : True / False

Appendix 4: Experiment questions

Comprehensibility:

Please rate the email by miss/mister [last name] on the following traits:

1. The email is easy to read
 1. Strongly disagree
 2. .
 3. .
 4. .
 5. Strongly agree

2. It is clear what the email is about.
 1. Strongly disagree
 2. .
 3. .
 4. .
 5. Strongly agree

3. I understood the email.
 1. Strongly disagree
 2. .
 3. .
 4. .
 5. Strongly agree

Competence:

Please rate miss/mister [last name] on the following traits:

1.
 1. Unprofessional
 2. .
 3. .
 4. .
 5. Professional

2. .
 1. Uneducated
 2. .
 3. .
 4. .
 5. Educated

3. .
 1. Not proficient
 2. .
 3. .
 4. .
 5. Proficient

Appendix 5. Statement of own work

Print and sign this Statement of own work form and add it as the last appendix in the final version of the Bachelor's thesis that is submitted as a hard copy to the first supervisor.

Student name: Loes te Walvaart

Student number: s1009622

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: Deurne, 08-06-2020