



# The Impact of the Cooperative Learning of Idioms on EFL Learners' Fluency

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## Abstract

*Idioms, indeed, constitute a notoriously difficult area of foreign language learning and teaching because, by definition, idioms are conventionalized expressions whose overall meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of their constituent parts, and they are conceived as the natural decoders of cultural aspects in real life settings and a major component of native-like communication. Thus, the issue of teaching idioms in EFL classroom needs a special pedagogical method to foster the learners' communicative skills. The current research paper attempts to scrutinize the impact of the cooperative learning of idioms upon EFL learners' fluency. Therefore, it follows a one group pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design, with a sample group of fifteen (15) first-year students at the Department of English at M'sila University. Their fluency was evaluated before and after the intervention sessions within which the participants were requested to implement peer-to-peer tutoring for a whole semester. The findings indicated that learning idioms cooperatively fosters the learner's fluency through facilitating the vocabulary retention (many words within one unit), and enabling him to understand the thoughts, emotions and views of the native speakers, and providing the learner with information about the underlying parameters of English. Moreover, it raises his awareness of figurative language to have better communication strategies. Thus, the consideration of culture in designing and developing course materials is highly recommended to reach higher level of oral proficiency in English language.*

**Keywords:** *Idioms; Fluency; EFL learner; Peer-to-peer tutoring.*

## 1. Introduction

Language is a social practice that people do to express, create and interpret meanings, and also to maintain social and interpersonal relationships. As far as the learning of English as a foreign language is concerned, any EFL learner seeks to be like the native-speaker who is, according to many scholars, the one who has intuitive knowledge of the language (Davies, 1991; Stern, 1983), able to produce fluent spontaneous discourse (Davies, 1991; Maum, 2002; Medgyes, 1992), communicatively competent (Davies, 1991; Liu, 1999; Medgyes, 1992), and able to communicate within different social settings (Stern, 1983).

To achieve these features, a non-native speaker needs a specific instruction that can afford him a multifaceted method that can cope simultaneously with fluency and the proficiency of communicating adequately in varying social contexts. In this regard, a great deal of literature emphasizes the culturally appropriate language use (Peterson and Coltrane, 2003), where the knowledge of linguistic features is not fully adequate for successful communication; however, it must be supported by an awareness of sociocultural context, tendencies, conventions, and norms in which the communication occurs. Furthermore, it is worth noting that there is an interwoven relationship between language and culture, which is highlighted by various manifestations of conventionalized language such as formulaic chunks that are used to reflect culture in real life settings. Research studies, for instance; show that formulaic chunks constitute at least one-third to one-half of English language (Conklin & Schmitt 2008). Idioms, as one type of these formulaic expressions, appear to be the natural decoders of cultural aspects in real life settings, and represent figurative interpretations of customs, traditions, historical events, standards, stereotypes, and even emotional models of communication (Grant & Bauer, 2004).

Since the way native speakers use English in the real world is largely idiomatic and it is assumed that a fluent non-native speaker is expected to be similarly idiomatic, and should know the appropriate use of the idiom in a given context. And because few, if any, studies have not investigated the effect of learning idioms on learners' fluency, we thought, in the current paper, of a teaching method that focuses on enhancing EFL learners' fluency via the cooperative learning of idioms far from the traditional teaching method by addressing the following question: Are there any significant effects of cooperative learning of idioms on L2 learners' fluency?



## 2. Method:

To scrutinize the impact of the cooperative learning of idioms upon EFL learners' fluency, one group pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design was conducted. The fluency of the participants was evaluated before and after the intervention sessions within which the participants were requested to implement peer-to-peer tutoring in learning idioms for a whole semester.

### 2.1. The participants

The research sample consisted of fifteen (15) male and female first-year students from the department of English at M'sila University in Algeria. The participants were divided randomly into three sub-groups to receive the treatment.

### 2.2. Data collection instruments

For the study purposes, Skehan's fluency measurement categorization (2005) was adopted with adaptations. The selected transcripts taken from the participants' oral performances were analyzed focusing on measuring the rate of existence of three major parameters during one selected minute from the audiotapes:

- 1) **Speech repair:** a) repetition, b) correction, and c) reformulation.
- 2) **Speech breakdowns** including: a) unfilled pauses, and b) filled pauses.
- 3) **Speech rate.**

The measures of fluency conducted in this study are:

- Mean length of pauses where a pause is an unfilled silence of longer than 0.25 a second.
- Mean number of filled pauses, e.g. em and er
- Repair measures: mean number of repetition, self- correction and reformulation aspects per minute
- Speech rate: number of words per minute.

**2.3. The procedure:** The procedure of the research went through three phases.

#### Phase 1:

In the first-phase, each student was asked to think of one specific topic and talk freely about, while the researcher tried to record them and analyze their recordings to measure their fluency before the treatment sessions.

#### Phase 2 (Treatment sessions):

Along a whole semester, the participants received ten treatment sessions within which they were requested to work cooperatively to understand the idioms and to contextualize them following the following steps:

1. The teacher introduces a set of idioms. As most idioms belong to simple categories, e.g. similes, binomials, proverbs, metaphors, and euphemisms, the teacher asks the students to find some sample idioms under the chosen category.
2. The teacher asks the students to refer to some resources such as Internet or a good dictionary to help them finding out more about the meanings and origins of idioms, and collecting information about their use.
3. Then, each group writes cooperatively conversations or plays with the given idioms.
4. Once all groups have finished, each group forwards to act out the conversation they have written. This way, they practise the idiom phrases; and they hear each other's' examples, and discover the different ways of incorporating idioms in conversations and plays.

#### Phase 3:

To depict the progress that might occur in the students' oral performance, a post-test was conducted by requesting them to elaborate a conversation or a play and then perform them to be analyzed later to measure their fluency enhancement.

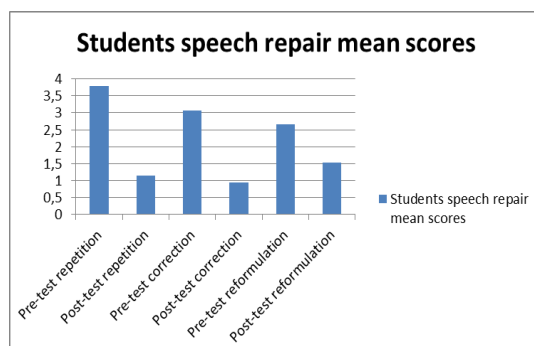
## 3. Findings:

The obtained results of the pre and post- tests of the different fluency aspects are as follows:



### 3.1. Pre-test and post-test' results of speech repair aspects

The mean scores of the students' results prior and after the training sessions are indicated below in a graph followed by a speech repair paired samples test table



Graph (01): Students' speech repair mean scores

Table (01): The Speech Repair Paired Samples Test table

		Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speech Repair	Pre-test / repetition	3.53	1.175	4.409	
	Post-test/ repetition	1.07	1.100		0.001
	Pre-test / correction	3.07	1.981	5.323	0.000
	Post-test/ correction	0.93	1.100		
	Pre-test / reformulation	2.67	1.175	2.605	0.021
	Post-test/ reformulation	1.53	1.356		

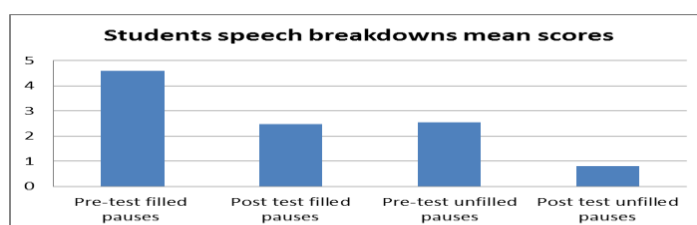
#### 3.1.1. Results Analysis

The above graph and the Paired Samples Test table show the significant difference between the mean scores that the participants obtained in the pretest and posttest of the repetition aspect, where we've got a t value of 4.409, which gives us a p-value or 2-tailed significance value of 0.001 and this is a significant result.

As far as the correction aspect is concerned, we've got a t value of 5.323, which gives us a p-value – or 2-tailed significance value – of 0.000. A standard alpha level is 0.05, and 0.000 is smaller than 0.05, so there is a significant difference between the scores in the pretest and the posttest of the correction aspect.

The results show also a significant difference between the scores reached in the pretest and posttest of the reformulation aspect, where the t value reaches 2.605, which gives us a p-value – or 2-tailed significance value – of 0.021. And because a standard alpha level is 0.05, and 0.021 is smaller than 0.05, so there is a significant difference between the reformulation pre and post-test outcomes.

### 3.2. Pre and post-test' results of speech breakdowns aspects:



Graph (02): Students' breakdowns mean scores

Table (02): The Speech breakdowns Paired Samples Test table

		Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speech breakdowns	Pre-test / Unfilled pauses	2.53	2.066	4.377	0.001
	Post-test/ Unfilled pauses	0.80	1.207		
	Pre-test / Filled pauses	4.60	1.724	4.904	0.000
	Post-test/ Filled pauses	2.47	0.990		

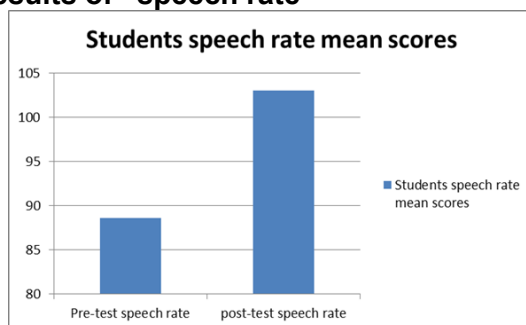


### 3.2.1. Results Analysis

In table (02), the unfilled pauses aspect the students' reach the outcomes that reach a t value of 4.377, which gives us a p-value – or 2-tailed significance value of 0.001 which really confirms the significant result. for any plausible alpha level. A standard alpha level is 0.05, and 0.001 is smaller than 0.05, so there is a significant difference between the scores in pretest and posttest conditions.

With the filled pauses fluency aspect, the participants got the scores that lead to a t value of 4.904, which gives a p-value or 2-tailed significance value of 0.000 which represents a significant difference between the scores in pretest and posttest results.

### 3.3. Pre and post-test' results of speech rate



Graph (03): Students' speech rate mean scores

Table (03): The Speech rate Paired Samples Test table

		Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speech rate	Pre-test / Speech rate	78.20	24.223	3.314	0.005
	Post-test/ Speech rate	89.47	23.787		

### 3.3.1. Results Analysis

From table (03), the t value is 3.314, which gives us a p-value or 2-tailed significance value of 0.005 and because the standard alpha level is 0.05, and 0.005 is smaller than 0.05, so there is a significant difference between the scores achieved in pretest and posttest outcomes.

## 4. Conclusion

The findings of this research paper indicated that learning idioms cooperatively did not only enhance learners' fluency, but it also helped them understand the native speaker way of thinking. Moreover, they showed that this technique facilitated the vocabulary retention and it provided the learners with enough information about the underlying parameters of English, and raised their awareness of figurative language to meet the communicative demands. Additionally, the interactive nature of the context led them to be highly motivated to acquire more communication strategies, and get rid of some awkward behaviors.

Therefore, the consideration of culture and more specifically idioms is highly recommended in designing and developing course materials to reach higher level of fluency in English language. With idioms, teachers and materials' designers face the difficulty of making principled decisions about which idioms to instruct, and which teaching method should be employed. For that reason, it is probably beneficial to use a mixture of procedures in order to create a variety of tasks and activities that appeal to different learners' levels and needs.

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