

## LEARNING IDIOM: A TOOL FOR MASTERING HIGHER VOCABULARY SKILL FOR EFL LEARNERS

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### Abstract

Indonesian EFL learners have proven to have positive attitude towards English as an international language. Vocabulary is the single most important aspect of foreign language learning. Idiom plays an important role as the part of multi-word expression of knowing word dimension. This study aims to focus in analyzing the importance of idiom for EFL learners. A random number of 10 students majoring in English Department at Tidar University, Indonesia was surveyed using a questionnaire. The study revealed that EFL learners have already been aware of the significance in improving English in the likeness of native English speakers by mastering idiomatic expression.

**KEYWORDS:** EFL, Idiom, Multi-word expression

### Introduction

It is clear that language leads the role in communication all over the world. It is a need to learn English since English is the universal language. Three basic components of learning English are pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Knight, in Khamesipour (2015), believes that vocabulary is the single most important aspect of foreign language learning. In another definition, vocabulary is the knowledge of words and word meanings (Khamesipour M. , 2015). Learning vocabulary means improving knowledge of words. Richards(2015) states that dimension of knowing a word differs into seven, that are word relations, multiple meanings, register, collocations, multi-word expressions, grammatical properties of words, and cross-linguistic differences. Every dimension should be learned if we want to master vocabulary. The most problem that usually EFL students get is to learn idiom as the part of multi-word expressions.

Multi-word expression is made up of two or more words, and the meaning often could not be understood from knowing the individual word meanings in the expression (Richards, 2015). Nowadays most of native speakers prefer to speak with idioms, so their talks will be not too formal and flexible. That is why it is important for the EFL students to learn multi-word expressions, especially idiom, in order to know or understand what the native speakers have said. Unfortunately, it is hard for EFL students to learn idiom because they generally learn vocabulary with remembering word by word. The purpose of this study is to discuss the solution for EFL students' problem of learning idiom. A method will be explained as clear as possible, so it will be useful for the readers, especially for foreign language students. The paper is focused in considering idioms as part of vocabulary mastery that is important to be learned by EFL

students.

### Research Method

This research type is qualitative. The ideal technique to collect the data in this study is using open-ended questionnaire. There is no predefined option or category in open-ended questionnaire, so the participants should supply their own answers. The participants can give response exactly as how they want to fill the answer and then the researcher will elaborate more the meaning of participants' answers. The study tries to answer eight research questions, those are all about how important learning vocabulary is especially in learning idiom. the participants are 10 university students of English Department from the 4th, 6th, and 8th semesters that represent the EFL students (3 male and 7 female).

### Discussion

According to Crystal in Tadayyon & Ketabi(2014), an idiom is “a term that is used in grammar and lexicology to refer to word sequence which is restricted syntactically and semantically. Idiom is a phrase or a fixed expression that has a figurative meaning, or sometimes literal meaning. It is hard for EFL students learn about idiom because the meaning of idiom is quite different, if we translate it word by word. In fact, most of foreign language students like to translate English as the source language into their own language as the target language literally. Sometimes it will ruin the meaning of idiom because the meaning is not the same at all. The effect of this particular problem is misunderstanding in communication.

For example :

Idiom (figurative meaning)	Meaning	Idiom (literally meaning)	Meaning
A piece of cake.	Very easy.	All of a sudden.	Suddenly.
Break a leg!	Good luck!	After one's own heart.	As what heart wants.
A man of the world.	Keep the promise.	Easier said than done.	It's easy to say, but hard to do.
On leave.	Out of duty.	Man proposes, God disposes.	Man plans, God decides.

Table above shows the example of idiom with figurative meaning and literally meaning. The figurative meaning is very different with the idiom, while the meaning of literally is can be known directly because both the idiom and the meaning are almost the same. This is also the reason why EFL students are hard to learn idiom. Nation (2001:343), as cited in Key Issues in Language Teaching (2015) recommends

the use of activities, such as the one below, to help learners in memorizing multi-word expression especially idiom with figurative meaning, particularly with low-level learners :

Write each chunk on a small card and also its translation on the another side, so that there has not to be passive retrieval of its form or meaning.

Memorize the chunk with repeating it loudly.

Space the repetitions so that there is an increasingly greater interval between learning sessions.

Use mnemonic trick a such as the keyword technique. Putting the chunk into a sentence, visualizing the meaning of the chunk examples, and analyzing its parts. It will the mental processing quality and help learning.

Do not learn chunks with similar words or meanings together. They will interfere with each other.

Keep changing the order of the word cards to avoid serial learning.

Beside rolling out the the Nation's' recommendation above, this paper will display some problem solving of idiomatic learning by elaborate the meaning of participants' answer in the questionnaire. Some problem will also be explained clearly, so EFL students can avoid the problem in order to learn idiomatic expression.

The first question is to know how important learning vocabulary is. Mastering vocabulary skill in order to become fluent in English is very important. As we know that vocabulary is the basic of English. If we want to know English and speak English fluently, we need to enrich our vocabulary knowledge. The more vocabulary that we know, the more we can speak English well. Most of participants of this research said that vocabulary is very important to be learned because it is used to build our knowledge in English. However, English is the universal language, so it should be known most books or other references are translated or originally written in English. It is also the reason why we need to learn vocabulary. EFL students must be easier to interpret or express a word from the source language into the target language (English) if they have so much vocabulary bank. The concept of effective communication, as cited in Shirazi & Talebinezhad (2013), depends on the understanding of the speaker and listener who tries to convey the speaker's meaning. It means that the speaker and the listener have to have same understanding in the meaning of words. The only way to place the words on a par is with knowing words or vocabulary.

The result of the second question shows that most EFL students are still not too often in learning vocabulary. The participants mostly answer if they only learn vocabulary when they are in the college in order to do their assignments. Only four of ten total samples that learn vocabulary regularly. This common case is often happened in developing country which has English as their foreign language instead of second language. It explains something which needs to be concerned is that the EFL students especially in Indonesia still do not pay attention too much in the importance of learning vocabulary while they actually is facing ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), as reported in Indonesian Investments Official Website (2016), which means that they need to learn English whether they do want or they do not want it.

The next question got same answers from the 10 total samples. All of the samples said that they get their vocabulary improvement in college. It shows English teaching and learning process in college has already been going effectively. In fact, the method that the lecturer is usually used, stated by one of samples, does not sound interesting. The lecturer demands the good writing with unbored vocabulary. In the other words, the lecturers demands the variety of words in student's writing. Everytime students have a class, they will automatically get a new vocabulary. They absolutely get so much vocabulary that they have not known from their lecturer or from teaching media, such as books, journals, and internet. The intensity of learning in class is almost every day, so it is not surprised if most EFL students get their vocabulary improvement in their class.

Seeing that the method of learning vocabulary does not look like interesting, in the fourth question tries to shows the other ways in learning vocabulary and of course it is more interesting than the learning method above. The way to improve English vocabulary can be applied in a fun way. The example is watching English movie. You will get many new vocabularies by watching movie. The method that is kindly shared by one of online school in London to increase your vocabulary bank is keeping a notebook when you watch an English movie, writing down any new vocabularies, then you will remember it, if you do not know the meaning, you would better ask your friend or your lecturer (Bloomsbury, 2013). Vocabulary in English movie is easy to be learned because it contains daily words, idiom, and colloquial expression. Beside that, we can directly learn vocabulary from the native English speakers. All of samples agree that it is more effective to learn with such a fun way like that. They said that there will be so much new words which can be found when watching movie, so they like to improve their vocabulary with watching movie.

In contrast, the fifth question tries to reveal that most EFL students do not like to read a book in order to master vocabulary skill. Ironically, 80% of samples think reading is boring, so improving vocabulary with reading a book is not interesting. To support the data, a study entitled "Most Littered Nation In the World", as reported by Kompas.com

(2016), reveals that Indonesia got the 60<sup>th</sup> position from the total 61 countries as the littered nations. It means that level of interest in reading a book is still very low. In fact, the best way to improve vocabulary is by reading book. EFL students should recognize how important reading book is because they need to improve their vocabulary as the effort to decrease the consequence of the country that can be more left behind. In increasing reading interest, it needs a movement which can be spread out and unstoppable. It is the government's role to make this movement, in order to develop the country.

Despite the fact above, most samples said that the best way to improve vocabulary is by learning with the native English speakers. Native speakers speak English fluently, it makes the listeners, in this context is EFL students, understand and get vocabulary improvement easier. In the sixth question, samples give answers all the same. They think that it is more effective and take more little time to learn vocabulary directly from the native speakers of English. Moreover, we also can learn the pronunciation. Seeing the geographical condition of Indonesia and the country where the native English speaker live are so far away, there are many ways to make a communication with them. The development of technology is the problem resolved in this case. Many applications or social media provide a room chat, voice-call, and even video-call. The example is Skype, Azar, Whatsapp, Facebook, and so on. EFL students can easily communicate with native English speakers, so the facilities to improve their ability in English is wider. The possibility of mastering English vocabulary will increase. The lack of this kind of learning method is just because sometimes native speakers of English speak fastly, so EFL students as the listener will not understand what they have said. But, actually this kind of situation give a good effect for EFL students as the motivation to learn more vocabulary, so they will understand in communication.

The seventh question is focused on the main point in this mini research, that is about idiom. Most samples said that it is important to master idiom in order to make their English skill better. One sample's answer even told that learning idiom is a must because the meaning sometimes different with the original word's meaning. Idiom can vary the words in speaking and also writing, so it will be not monotone. The result of the questionnaire supports the explanation before about the importance of learning idiom. EFL students should learn idiomatic words and phrase in order to make their English skill better and almost same with native English speaker.

The last question concerns on the possibility whether EFL students can speak as fluent as the native speaker of English or not. It is related with the using of idiomatic words and phrase because native English speakers often use idiom when they speak. If EFL students want to be as fluent as native English speakers, they should learn idiom also beside mastering vocabulary. Only knowing vocabulary will make the speaking or writing be inflexible and sounds too formal. Even in the formal speech, sometimes they

insert idiom to vary their vocabularies. It shows that learning idiom is a need, not only because it is apart of vocabulary, but also it makes our English skill become better.

### **Conclusion**

Colorful language makes idioms a lot of fun to be learnt. It is important to not only teach the meaning of idioms, but also to teach how to use them correctly and effectively. The results of participants' answers above is also strengthen the importance of learning idiomatic expression for non-native English students, especially for foreign learners. Even though many evidences show a terrible fact how idiom is learnt by EFL students, but most participants have already been recognizing that idiom is very important to be learnt. When non-native English speaker or EFL students use an idiom correctly, he or she will sound very fluent and natural. There are so many methods that can be taught to EFL students when learning idiom. Even it can be fun to learn idiom as it has already explained in the discussion part. We have to match which method will be more appropriate to apply in teaching and learning process. It can be based on the level of learners (beginners, intermediate, advanced).

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