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Research paper

Enhancing Idiom Mastery in Iranian EFL Students Through Drama Instruction

SeyedehKhadijeh Najafi[1]*, Zahra Eftekhar Hosseini[2]

[1]Department of English, Kazerun Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kazerun, Iran
[2]Department of English, Bushehr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bushehr, Iran

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*corresponding author: SeyedehKhadijeh Najafinajafi2548@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study explored the impact of drama-based instruction on the comprehension of idioms among Iranian EFL learners. A total of 41 EFL learners participated, divided into control and experimental groups. The research employed an experimental design, utilizing pre- and post-test evaluations to assess the effect of drama instruction on idiom knowledge. Initially, there was no significant difference between the two groups' idiom knowledge. However, the experimental group demonstrated significant improvement in their post-test scores, despite having lower initial scores. These results indicate that drama instruction can effectively enhance idiom comprehension among Iranian EFL learners, offering a creative and engaging approach to language teaching. The study highlights the positive role of drama-based teaching methods in language acquisition and provides valuable insights for curriculum developers, educators, and language learners. By emphasizing the potential of innovative instructional strategies, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective language teaching methods and the importance of incorporating diverse pedagogical approaches to foster deeper language understanding and proficiency.

Keywords:Drama, EFL Learners, Idioms

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Introduction

Idioms are prevalent in everyday language across various cultures, offering valuable insights into both linguistic and cultural contexts. English, for instance, features approximately 25,000

idiomatic expressions, which Larson (1984) defines as sequences of words whose meanings diverge from the literal interpretations of the individual words. These figurative expressions, encompassing both literal and metaphorical meanings, are crucial for effective communication and language comprehension. Idioms are integral to language understanding and persistently influence how language is used and interpreted.

Earlier research on English idioms has predominantly concentrated on their typology, semantics, and syntax, often overlooking their pragmatic roles in discourse. Recent studies by Strässler (1982), Fernando (1996), and Moon (1995) have shifted focus towards pragmatic, functional, and corpus-linguistic perspectives. However, interpreting idioms remains challenging for non-native speakers due to their metaphorical nature. This complexity necessitates that English learners master common idioms to achieve fluency. Proficiency in second language (L2) idioms is often hindered by their stereotyped structures, which limit variability (Gibbs, 1987; Gibbs, 1991).

Carter (2002) highlights the difficulties idioms pose for non-native learners, as their meanings often extend beyond literal interpretations. To overcome these challenges, learners can benefit from world knowledge and strategic insights, which can be developed through targeted training that emphasizes linguistic clues and background knowledge (Nation & Meara, 2012).

Idioms enrich language by adding depth and color, enhancing nuanced communication, and reflecting cultural heritage. Mastery of idiomatic expressions not only improves cross-cultural understanding but also aids in interpreting various forms of media. Proficiency in idioms facilitates social interactions and enhances writing skills. In professional contexts, the appropriate use of idioms demonstrates language competence and cultural awareness. Moreover, learning idioms can be an engaging challenge, maintaining learner interest and curiosity.

In today's interconnected digital age, advanced reading skills are fundamental for fostering critical thinking, effective communication, creativity, and collaboration—key 21st-century learning skills. Ineffective teaching methods, inadequate curricula, and lack of student engagement often lead to poor reading comprehension.

This study specifically examines the effect of drama-based instruction on the comprehension of idiomatic expressions in English. The necessity for EFL students to understand idioms is heightened by their frequent use in everyday language. Idioms are not only linguistically important but also play a crucial pragmatic role, reflecting the culture and history of their native users (Rizq, 2015). Gass and Selinker (2001) emphasize that non-native speakers often find lexical errors more disruptive than grammatical errors. Hence, formal education that provides metalinguistic input for idioms is recommended, considering various factors that influence idiom acquisition and comprehension (Vulchanova, Vulchanov&Stankova, 2011).

In summary, idioms are fundamental to language, manifesting in specific contexts and holding both cultural and linguistic significance. Foreign language learners face challenges in idiom comprehension, necessitating a deeper understanding of the processes and factors involved. Phuong (2023) identified factors such as proficiency, language skills, educational background, cultural and historical knowledge, and learner effort as influencing the learning of English proverbs and idioms. Kurnia (2016) investigated the use of idiomatic expressions in speaking skills, finding that students with a stronger command of idioms demonstrated greater proficiency in spoken English.

The challenge of acquiring idiomatic proficiency is well-documented (Zyzik, 2011). Despite this, many university-level EFL learners lack sufficient knowledge of idiomatic expressions. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring a method to indirectly expose students to more

idiomatic expressions through drama, fostering automatic comprehension during reading. In university courses, students encounter diverse reading comprehension materials, but some struggle to effortlessly integrate idioms into their knowledge even after completing these courses.

To address this issue, the researchers incorporated drama into reading comprehension courses, a strategy rarely featured in textbooks. They argue that drama activities, though scarce, are valuable for enhancing cognitive skills such as decision-making and analysis, which are critical for effective comprehension. The study aims to investigate the impact of drama instruction on Iranian EFL learners' understanding of idiomatic expressions, recognizing the potential of this approach to bridge the gap in idiomatic knowledge among university students. Therefore, the research question posed is: Does drama instruction affect idiom knowledge among Iranian EFL learners? The null hypothesis for this study is: Drama instruction does not affect idiom knowledge among Iranian EFL learners.

To address the gaps in previous research, which did not fully explore the potential of drama as an effective teaching method for enhancing idiomatic understanding, the present study demonstrates that integrating drama into the language curriculum significantly improves learners' idiomatic knowledge. Drama creates an interactive and engaging environment where students encounter idioms in realistic and varied contexts through activities such as role-playing, improvisation, and simulated real-life scenarios. This hands-on approach allows learners to internalize idioms more naturally, resulting in a deeper and more practical understanding.

The study also highlights the role of drama-based instruction in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application. Students become more adept at using idioms appropriately in different situations, showcasing the value of drama in fostering idiomatic competence.

The present research confirms that drama-based instruction is a highly effective method for enhancing EFL learners' understanding of idioms. It not only enriches linguistic proficiency but also makes the learning process more engaging and contextually meaningful. The findings suggest that incorporating drama into language teaching can significantly enhance learners' ability to grasp and use idiomatic expressions, leading to a more comprehensive and effective language learning experience.

Recent studies reinforce these conclusions, emphasizing the substantial role of drama in language acquisition. For instance, Albalawi (2021) found that drama-based activities enhance EFL learners' overall language competence, while Zhang et al. (2022) highlighted the specific benefits of drama in improving idiomatic comprehension through immersive and context-rich learning experiences. These studies support the notion that drama can be a powerful tool in language education, particularly in developing students' ability to understand and use idioms effectively.

Methodology

Participants

The study involved 41 female EFL learners majoring in English Translation at Islamic Azad University, Bushehr Branch, Iran. The participants were divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group. The experimental design required all participants to complete both pretests and posttests to assess the impact of the intervention. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 25 years.

Instruments

The study utilized a researcher-developed instrument designed to evaluate students' familiarity with idiomatic expressions. This tool was based on prior research and aimed to assess the participants' knowledge of idioms.

Data Collection Procedures

Approval for the study was obtained from the authorities at Islamic Azad University, Bushehr Branch. The 41 participants were randomly assigned to either a control group or an experimental group. The control group followed the standard curriculum, while the experimental group received additional drama-based instruction integrated into their regular coursework. This approach aimed to determine if drama instruction would enhance participants' knowledge of idiomatic expressions.

At the end of the term, both groups took the same test, which was analyzed using SPSS software. The test comprised 30 multiple-choice items designed to assess idiom knowledge. Each correct response was awarded 1 point, with the total possible score being 30. Higher scores indicated a better understanding of idiomatic expressions. The test was administered as both a pretest and a posttest to measure changes in idiom comprehension before and after the intervention. Before the main study, a pilot test was conducted with students of comparable proficiency levels to ensure the instrument's reliability, resulting in a reliability coefficient of 0.838.

Results

Demographic Profile of Study Participants

In this section, Table 1 below presents the number, percentage, and gender distribution of participants in both the experimental and control groups, based on the data collected from the questionnaire.

Table 1
The number and frequency of participants

Groups			Frequency	Percent
Control	Valid	female	21	51.2
Experimental	Valid	female	20	48.7

As shown in Table 1, out of the 41 female participants, 21 (51.2%) were assigned to the control group, while 20 (48.7%) were in the experimental group.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics
Dependent Variable: post

group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Control	18.86	6.405	21
Experimental	21.35	6.335	20
Total	20.07	6.416	41

Table 2 displays the mean and standard deviation of students' scores following drama education in both the control and experimental groups. It can be seen that the experimental group has a higher mean score after the education.

Answers to the research questions

The first research question of the study was: “Does drama instruction affect idiom knowledge among Iranian EFL learners?” The corresponding null hypothesis proposed that drama instruction does not impact idiom knowledge among these learners.

To address this question, ANCOVA (Analysis of Covariance) was employed to control for any intervening variables that might affect the results. Specifically, the pre-test scores were considered

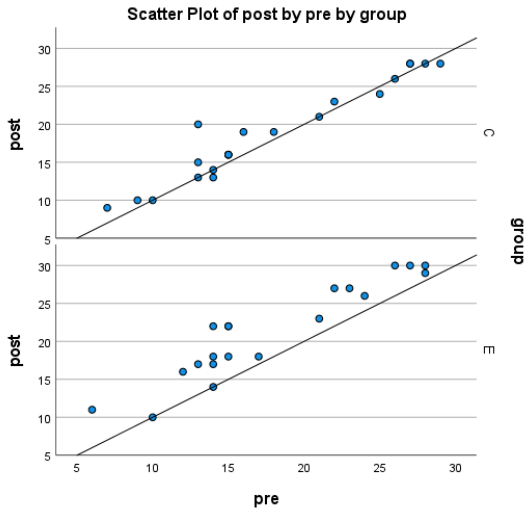
as covariates to adjust for their potential influence on the post-test outcomes, allowing for a more precise comparison between the experimental and control groups.

For ANCOVA analysis, two key assumptions must be met:

1. There should be a consistent regression line between the two groups in both pre-tests and post-tests, which will be illustrated in the scatter plot below.

2. The variances across groups should be homogeneous, as indicated by Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances.

Figure 1 displays the collected data from the test, detailing the number, percentage, and gender distribution of participants in both the experimental and control groups.



Idiomatic knowledge of Iranian EFL learners in the experimental and control groups, assessed through pretest and posttest evaluations

Both scatter plots show the linear relationship between the dependent variable (post-test scores) and the predictor variable (pre-test scores) for the experimental and control groups. Additionally, the plots suggest that the slope of the hypothetical regression line is similar for both groups.

Table 3.
Regression line

group	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
C	Regression	768.048	1	768.048	277.838	.000[b]
	Residual	52.523	19	2.764		
	Total	820.571	20			
E	Regression	672.470	1	672.470	134.375	.000[b]
	Residual	90.080	18	5.004		
	Total	762.550	19			

a. Dependent Variable: post
b. Predictors: (Constant), pre

In both the experimental and control groups, a linear relationship exists between pre-test and post-test scores, as indicated by the regression test's p-value being less than 0.05 in each group. The points on the scatter plot align closely along a hypothetical regression line.

Table 4
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects
Dependent Variable: post

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1504.178[a]	3	501.393	130.092	.000
Intercept	63.537	1	63.537	16.486	.000
group	6.523	1	6.523	1.693	.201
pre	1433.060	1	1433.060	371.825	.000
group * pre	.045	1	.045	.012	.914
Error	142.603	37	3.854		
Total	18167.000	41			
Corrected Total	1646.780	40			

a. R Squared = .913 (Adjusted R Squared = .906)

Table 4 shows that the significance level for the variable 'Group Pre-test' is 0.914, which exceeds 0.05. This suggests that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes is satisfied

Table 5
Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances
Dependent Variable: post

F	df1	df2	Sig.
2.122	1	39	.153

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.
a. Design: Intercept + pre + group

Given the non-significant level of 0.153 in the table above, we do not reject the null hypothesis of homogeneity of variances between the control and experimental groups at a 5% significance level. Thus, the hypothesis of equal variances is confirmed. We can now proceed to examine the first hypothesis: 'Drama instruction does not affect knowledge of idioms among Iranian EFL learners.

Table 6

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: post						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1504.132[a]	2	752.066	200.343	.000	.913
Intercept	64.110	1	64.110	17.078	.000	.310
Pretest	1440.473	1	1440.473	383.727	.000	.910
group	66.132	1	66.132	17.617	.000	.317
Error	142.648	38	3.754			
Total	18167.000	41				
Corrected Total	1646.780	40				
a. R Squared = .913 (Adjusted R Squared = .909)						

In Table 6, "Tests of Between-Subjects Effects," the One-way ANCOVA is employed to assess the significance of the Group factor and the effect of the Covariate. We will now analyze each of these factors and their influence on the Dependent Variable.

The covariate "pre," which represents the pre-test score, has been included in the model. The results from the "Tests of Between-Subjects Effects" table reveal a significant impact of the covariate on the Dependent Variable (P-value = 0.000). This indicates that the pre-test score significantly affects the post-drama education score. The effect size for this covariate is 0.910. Since Partial Eta Squared ranges from zero to one, with values closer to one indicating a greater impact, this exceptionally high effect size reflects a substantial influence of the pre-test score on the post-drama education score.

The Group factor, representing the experimental and control groups, is also found to be a significant and influential factor (P-value = 0.000). This suggests a significant difference in post-scores between the control and experimental groups. Thus, it can be inferred that students receiving drama education exhibit a statistically significant difference in scores compared to those who do not. The effect size for the Group factor is 0.317. This effect size is smaller compared to that of the pre-test score, indicating that the pre-test score has a more substantial impact on the response variable.

At the bottom of the table, R Squared = 0.913 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.909) is reported. The R Squared value indicates how well the model explains the variability in the response variable. In this case, the R Squared value signifies that approximately 91.3% of the variability in the post-score can be explained by the model, which includes the main effect of Group as the Independent Variable and pre-as the Covariate. The Adjusted R Squared, which accounts for the number of predictors in the model, provides a slightly more conservative estimate.

Discussion

The current study investigates the impact of drama instruction on Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' comprehension of idiomatic expressions. This research delves into how drama-based teaching methods influence learners' grasp of idioms and their overall development in this area. Specifically, it explores whether integrating drama into language instruction can enhance idiomatic knowledge and comprehension among EFL students.

The findings of the study clearly demonstrate that drama instruction positively affects learners' knowledge of idioms. The integration of drama into the language curriculum has been shown to significantly enhance students' understanding of idiomatic expressions. This improvement is not

incidental; rather, it reflects a substantial and meaningful advancement in learners' ability to interpret and use idioms effectively. These findings align with previous research indicating that interactive and immersive learning environments contribute to better language acquisition, particularly in the realm of idiomatic expressions.

Drama-based instruction provides a dynamic and interactive learning environment that facilitates a deeper and more contextualized understanding of idiomatic expressions. By engaging in drama activities, learners encounter idioms in diverse and realistic contexts, which allows them to experience and internalize the meanings and usages of these expressions more naturally. This experiential learning approach incorporates elements such as role-playing, improvisation, and real-life scenarios, all of which contribute to a more practical and nuanced comprehension of idioms. Additionally, this method allows learners to experiment with language in a low-stakes environment, promoting confidence in using idiomatic expressions in more formal or everyday communication.

Moreover, the study highlights that drama-based instruction supports the development of idiomatic knowledge to a significant extent. The immersive and context-rich nature of drama activities enhances students' ability to apply idioms appropriately in various situations, thus bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical usage. This is particularly important for EFL learners, who may struggle with idioms due to their figurative nature, which often does not translate directly into learners' native languages. By contextualizing idioms within a drama framework, students can better understand the cultural and situational nuances that inform their use, leading to a more profound and accurate application in communication.

The study affirms that drama-based instruction plays a crucial role in improving EFL learners' understanding of idioms. This approach not only makes the learning process more engaging and

enjoyable but also equips learners with valuable linguistic insights through interactive and contextualized experiences. The results suggest that incorporating drama into language education can be a highly effective strategy for developing learners' proficiency in understanding and using idiomatic expressions, ultimately leading to a richer and more effective language learning experience.

Furthermore, the broader implications of this study suggest that drama-based instruction could be beneficial beyond idiomatic comprehension. The skills developed through drama, such as improved listening, speaking, and cultural awareness, can contribute to overall language proficiency. This is supported by recent studies that emphasize the role of active learning strategies, like drama, in enhancing language skills and learner engagement (Zhang et al., 2022).

Incorporating drama into EFL instruction offers a holistic approach to language learning, where students are not merely passive recipients of information but active participants in the learning process. This aligns with contemporary educational theories that advocate for student-centered learning environments, where learners are encouraged to take ownership of their language development.

Overall, the study underscores the value of drama-based instruction as a powerful pedagogical tool in language education. It not only enhances idiomatic knowledge but also fosters a deeper connection between learners and the language they are studying. As the field of EFL education continues to evolve, it is crucial to explore and integrate innovative teaching methods like drama that cater to the diverse needs of learners and support their linguistic and cultural competence.

Conclusion

The present study involved 41 male and female EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners from Islamic Azad University, Bushehr Branch, Iran. The participants were divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group. An experimental approach was employed, with the experimental group receiving drama instruction in addition to their standard curriculum. To assess the impact of this instruction, a researcher-developed tool was used, designed based on previous research. This instrument aimed to evaluate students' familiarity with idiomatic expressions. Both pretests and post-tests were administered to measure learners' understanding of idioms before and after the drama instruction.

The results of the study indicate that drama instruction positively affects EFL learners' knowledge of idioms. Specifically, the drama-based approach contributed to the development of learners' idiomatic knowledge to a notable extent. This suggests that incorporating drama into language instruction can enhance students' ability to understand and use idiomatic expressions effectively. These findings align with recent studies, such as those by Albalawi (2021) and Zhang et al. (2022), which have also highlighted the efficacy of drama-based methods in language learning.

These findings offer valuable insights for curriculum designers, educators, and language learners. For curriculum designers, the study underscores the potential benefits of integrating drama-based methods into language programs, emphasizing the need for a more interactive and engaging approach to teaching idiomatic expressions. Educators can use these results to support the implementation of innovative teaching strategies that enhance idiomatic comprehension, encouraging a shift from traditional rote learning to more experiential learning methods.

Moreover, language learners can benefit from more engaging and context-rich learning experiences that facilitate a deeper understanding of idioms. The experiential nature of drama

instruction allows learners to encounter idiomatic expressions in a variety of contexts, making the learning process not only more enjoyable but also more effective. This hands-on approach can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, ensuring that learners are better equipped to use idiomatic expressions accurately in real-life situations.

Overall, the study highlights the effectiveness of drama instruction in improving idiomatic knowledge among EFL learners, suggesting that such methods could be a significant addition to language teaching practices. The findings provide a strong case for the inclusion of drama-based activities in language curricula, offering a promising avenue for enhancing linguistic proficiency and enriching the overall language learning experience. Future research could explore the long-term effects of drama instruction on idiomatic knowledge and its potential applications in other areas of language learning.

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