Non-Native Language Barriers’ Effects on Intercultural Business Settings and Professional Career Performance when Using Idioms

Track: Culture, Social and Ethical Issues
Non-Native Language Barriers’ Effects on Intercultural Business Settings and Professional Career Performance when Using Idioms

Abstract

This study dealt with specific attitudinal, motivational, and demographic information to be used in understanding the current challenges non-native speakers of English face in international business job positions, with respect to idiomatic business expressions. Specifically, the focus is on the familiarity, usage, knowledge and importance of idiomatic expressions by non-native speakers of English and how these variables affect cross-cultural business communication. The research attempted to uncover potential improvements for curricula in International Business, Communications, and language programs and course designs. The five research questions explored support the importance for non-native speakers of English of knowing English/idioms to have successful communication in English, particularly with native speakers.

Keywords: Business idiomatic expressions, English as a lingua franca, negotiation and clarification
1. **Introduction**

The overall purpose of this project was to collect specific attitudinal, motivational, and demographic information to be used in understanding the current challenges facing non-native speakers of English, in international business job positions, with respect to idiomatic business expressions. Idiomatic expressions, as mentioned, are expressions whose meanings are not clear from the grammatical rules of a language. This study attempted to uncover potential improvements for curricula in International Business, Communications, and language programs and course designs.

1.1. **Hypothesis**

The hypothesis was stated as: The more non-native speakers are familiar with idioms, the more likely they are to have successful communications with native speakers.

1.2. **Research Questions**

The major research question was: As a policy decision, is there evidence to support that teaching business idioms in Business Communication (BC) courses is beneficial for non-native speakers of English throughout their professional careers?

If so, the subsequent research questions:

1. Which idioms are respondents most likely to recognize?
2. Which idioms are respondents most likely to use/employ?
3. Which idioms are respondents most likely to be able to explain to others?
4. Which idioms do respondents perceive as the most important for their business communication?
5. Which benefits derived from knowledge of idiomatic expressions do respondents perceive as most important/salient/outstanding?
6. Is there any perceived relationship between knowledge of business idiomatic expressions and:
   a. Increased self-esteem
   b. Greater job satisfaction
c. Greater job productivity

7. Are there any meaningful subgroups of respondents who benefit by knowing/mastering business idioms?

8. What recommendations, if any, do respondents contribute regarding the importance of including business idiomatic expressions in BC curriculum?

The scope and the nature of the study center on a problem-solving approach which may influence policy decisions directly relevant to international business education and language training. The findings may provide insight for similar programs in other nations and regions of the world.

The study also presents case studies and research in the field of Business English as a Lingua Franca at the international level. These studies will provide the basis and justification for the study we proposed in this paper, which is focus on the case of non-native speakers of English working in international business job positions, located, but not limited to, in Puerto Rico, Mexico and United States. Thus, secondly, we will focus and examine the experience of business communication in English in the particular context of the multinational companies, drawn from samples from these three countries, through the familiarity, usage, knowledge and importance of idiomatic expressions of non-native speakers of English, and how these affected their perceptions of success in the company based on their responses.

1.3. Motivation and justification

Increased globalization has brought people from different cultures together to collaborate and compete internationally (Vijaya and Tiwari, 2010; Virkkula-Raisanen, 2010). As part of the global village we live in, the ability to communicate effectively with other cultures is a key to success and also a fundamental skill that companies seek in business graduates. Communication skills in business are crucial to establish and strengthen good business relationships and interpersonal skills. But, for global business to succeed internationally, their members must develop effective intercultural skills. Companies that spread to other countries must have a clear understanding of the cultural differences between locals and foreigners that work in the companies.

The research sites selected are, but not limited to, San Juan, Puerto Rico; Puebla, Mexico; and South Florida, United States. Each one of these cities has multinational companies (MNCs) that employ local business people, and in the case of Florida many non-native speakers of English are working in these MNCs. Puerto Rico is a leader in the corporate world with many multinational corporations operating locally (PRIDCO, 2011). This means that many Puerto Ricans work with supervisors and executives who only speak English. Many of the supervisors that work in these companies are native speakers of English, often with basic, or no knowledge of Spanish. Puebla in Mexico has become a center of economic activity. With a
population of 1.6 million inhabitants, Puebla is the 5th largest city in Mexico and one of the destinations for the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). It is becoming a business process outsourcing (BPO) center. Puebla has been attracting automotive industry and in fact, it has one of the largest automobile factories – Volkswagen and Audi –plus many of their goods and services suppliers. South Florida also has an extensive population of non-native speakers of English and it addition it serves as the headquarters for more than 1000 multinational companies.

2. Material and Methods

The design of this study is twofold. The first part was consistent, in spirit, with the Delphi technique. Internet searches revealed 528 idiomatic expressions (Griffin, 2004) potentially important for business. These were then used to create a survey in which experts in the field rated their perception of the importance of these expressions. These experts were defined as professors in business or those who teach business English classes (Finance, Accounting and International Business fields). It is important to point out that the experts spoke different types of English: British English, Indian English and American English. In essence, they were independently and anonymously asked to “forecast” what they viewed as the most important idiomatic expressions for non-native English speakers seeking success in business settings. Each expression was rated on a 5-point Likert scale; a score of 5 corresponded to the highest level of importance. The average time required to answer the questionnaire was slightly over one hour. All respondents mentioned “fatigue” and that the questionnaire was very long. We obtained 14 complete questionnaires; other experts declined due to time limitations. For these reasons, we did not continue with several rounds of questionnaires to look for increasing degrees of consensus. The experts also provided suggestion as possible questions to pose in the classification section, as well as an interesting discussion of idioms that should be or not be included. These experts served as a filter to select, from the 528 idioms, a total of 20 to 25 idioms considered to be most important in their fields and workplace.

In order to determine the most important idioms, we calculated the means of each expression and ranked them in descending order. The results of this first part were entered in a excel date spreadsheet. We selected the first 25 idioms that scored the highest in this scale.

The Delphi method usually comprises a small number of respondents and the results are not intended to be statistically significant. The results represent the synthesis of opinion or judgments of the group of experts; in this case the professors of business and business English who were willing to take the time to participate by answering the lengthy questionnaire. The decline-to-answer rate of potential respondents contacted was 70%. The reasons given were primarily a lack of time.

The second part of the study consisted of developing a new survey; also a 5 point Likert scale design; to be administered to business people working in international companies. A total of 14 business professionals who were at the moment working
in a global/multinational company and whose second language was English completed the pilot study. This survey addressed the aforementioned hypothesis and research questions. Essentially, we attempted to measure how important they perceived the knowledge of idioms for improved performance, success, and/or “climbing the corporate” ladder within their organization. The new survey was pilot tested for clarity and to reduce the average response to approximately 15 minutes. This was accomplished by eliminating lesser ranking expressions until the response-time goal was approximated. Twenty-five of the highest ranking expressions were included in the second survey. The idiomatic expressions are in Table 3.1.

Table 1 Highest Ranking Idiomatic Expressions Used for Survey #2.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Murphey’s Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Give them an inch and they’ll take a mile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Apples and oranges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>To save face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Keep your fingers crossed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>To lose face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bottom line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Don’t put all your eggs in one basket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>A piece of cake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Speak the same language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>See eye to eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>To know the ropes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>What goes around comes around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Give me a ballpark figure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Wing it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>To get lost in translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The last straw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>You need to read between the lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Don’t burn your bridges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>The light at the end of the tunnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Don’t rock the boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Just for the record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Loophole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>You can’t teach an old dog new tricks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Save your pennies for a rainy day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final survey was finally produced after the steps described above. The aforementioned process guaranteed a more rigorous methodology producing a survey that contained idioms which were selected by experts in different business fields. The questionnaire, a self-administered design, was created on-line with Qualtrics. The organization consisted of: an introductory section, general statement of the objective, questions for research information requirements, an identification section requesting demographic information, and a thank-you statement. In the first section they rated, on a Likert Scale, their familiarity, frequency of usage and rate of importance of business idiomatic expressions. Then, in the second section subjects rated on a Likert Scale the potential benefits of knowing these idioms for their professional career. Finally, they responded to Classification Information section. All of the authors requested support of acquaintances fitting the target profile to collaborate.
This study was cross-sectional; data was collected only once over a period of time. In order to collect the data needed to address the aforementioned research questions, a structured design with descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory/correlational (predictive) characteristics was developed. It is descriptive to the extent that most questions focus on measuring perceptions about idiomatic expressions. It is exploratory in the sense that, first, we looked the importance of idiomatic expressions and the challenge they represent for successful business communications. Second, we attempted to identify a potential area for improvement of business communications/language curricula and courses. The study is explanatory/correlational and predictive in the sense that it examines the relationship between knowledge of idioms and potential work-related benefits. In addition, it examines demographic and firm characteristics (grouping variables) that may serve to differentiate firms with certain perceptions toward knowledge and use of expressions (independent variables).

Table 2 Potential Benefits of Knowing Idioms for success in International Business

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Efficient communication/fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Effective communication/exchange of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Easier communication in multicultural settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Facilitated negotiations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Enhanced conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Improved interpersonal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Strengthened leadership skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Faster climbing of the corporate ladder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Greater frequency of salary raises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Increased earning power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Increased self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Greater overall job satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Greater overall job productivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1. Selection of Subjects (Target Population)

The respondents were non-native English speakers employed, at various management levels, in businesses with international functions to varying degrees. The industries represented included both products and services. The final database consisted of 334 respondents from various regions of the world.

2.2. Procedures

Respondents were contacted in person, by telephone and email to enlist their cooperation. Questionnaires were filled out using the Qualtrics platform. The questionnaires contained a cover paragraph explaining the generalities of the study as well reasons for participation. The time frame for collecting the data was from May 1st, 2015 to August 31st, 2015. The reasons cited, when we had the opportunity to receive feedback, for non-response were lack of time, forgetfulness, or server problems. With respect to missing data, the questionnaire was designed to be savable in seven parts. That is to say, respondents could finish one section, save it, and continue with the subsequent sections at a later time without losing the information.
3. Literature Review

As cited in Kankaanrant and Planken (2010), English plays an essential role in spoken communication in the business context, such as negotiations, meetings, email and advertising. English is an intrinsic part of communication in multinational settings and a fact of life for many business people (Akar, 2002; Bilbow 2002). As stated in Du-Babcock (2013), more and more, non-native speakers of English are using this language as means of communication, and thus its role has been increasing in use and in importance.

3.1. Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)

Language enables human beings to communicate. Thus, language enables individuals and companies to communicate (Charles, 2007). The language of communication in this era is English. The total numbers of people who speak English as a foreign language outnumber those who speak it as their mother tongue. About a quarter of the world’s population speaks English; and by 2060, the non-native speakers of English will outnumber native speakers of English by 50% (Kashru, 1992).

Business English has become the lingua franca of the international business world. It is undisputed that Business English as Lingua Franca (BELF) has dominated as the language of international business in the last few decades. “BELF….is employed as substitute for Business English because of the wider application of Business English in international business communication among nonnative speakers” (Yu, 2013, pp. 130). It has also become an intrinsic part of communication in multilingual settings for many business professionals (Kankaanranta and Lu, 2013; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Nickerson, 2005). More international business is done in English between non-native speakers than between native speakers (Charles, 2007). Yu (2013) states that research and teaching in this field is influenced by globalization as well as by the growth of the domestic economy.

The research in this field has shifted its focus to identifying language strategies used by non-native speakers to achieve, for example, effective communication in business interactions (Nickerson, 2005). Scholars in this field have focused their work on identifying core linguistics elements that conform to native speakers’ expectations so that they don’t cause intelligibility problems, and distinguish them from noncore elements recognized by native speakers as anomalies but that do not cause problems (Charles, 2007: p. 262). Misunderstandings are somehow managed. They are solved, and will only rarely lead to complete breakdowns of communication (Hinnenkamp, 1999). According to Wu (2103):
…the literature research in this field has shown that many colleges, universities, scholars and teachers have taken initiative to explore BE in terms of teaching methods and modes, teaching materials and they have endeavored to relate theories to practice which it totally different from intuition-oriented” (Wu, 2013, pp. 131).

Some studies have shown that problems in business interactions arise when there is linguistic imbalance between native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English (Pullin, 2010). Still, other studies have pointed that BELF speakers avoid and overcome misunderstandings in spite of the usage of non-standard forms of English. For most business professionals, having competence in BELF is an essential skill to be used along with their business knowledge (Kankaanranta and Lu, 2013; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). BELF should follow the principles of clarity, simplicity, and relational orientation.

The phenomenon of BELF has produced many varieties of English in countries where English is spoken as a second, third, or even fourth language. As BELF is adopted in other countries, it receives linguistic and cultural influence from the non-native speakers (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Nickerson, 2005; Charles, 2007). BELF will carry the non-native speaker’s culture, as well as his/her mother tongue discourse (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). In the companies included in Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) study, the researchers found that there was a hybrid version of English that contain features from the speakers’ mother tongue. The authors described it as: “…a simplified, shared code whose basis is English with highly specialized vocabulary and a variety of discourse practices” (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010: p. 402). These processes are similar to one of the theories of the pidgin and Creole language development in which speakers of different language background simplified their language to facilitate communication in a highly multilingual setting (Alleyne, 1988; Mufwene, 2001; Devonish, 1986).

Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) carried out a study with five globally-operating Finland-based companies, where they administered an online questionnaire. The authors wanted to learn about the business professionals’ perception of their BELF communication skills and that of their partners. The interviewees admitted facing several challenges in business interactions using BELF with native speakers of English. They showed lack of competence in English, limited repertoire of idioms, and incomprehensibility of some regional U.S. and U.K. accents (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). When these interviewees interacted with natives speakers of English, they tried to adopt their pronunciation or just made efforts to keep up with the conversation. In this study, the researchers found that the shared business domain of BELF, shared special field of expertise and length of relationship affected the participants’ BELF discourse. The interviewees stated business English was more useful for their work than “general” English, since BE was more persuasive, task-oriented, and goal-based.
Terminology and concepts of certain fields is usually more widely understood in English across cultures. Therefore, the expertise in the field meant an increase in business-related terms that helped in the communication process in cross-cultural settings. According to the findings in their study, Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) described some of the characteristics of BELF discourse as a simple and clear version of English, with no usage of idiomatic expressions or complex sentence structures. This could aid in the communication process among various non-native speakers. The participants admitted accommodating to simple and clear English.

The review of literature in these fields shows some gaps in research concerning intercultural communication interactions using BELF, thus a study focused in this topic is much needed. “Each achievement in BELF teaching and research will have a positive impact on economic development and global communications. There is no other subject that can surpass the great effect BELF has produced on international communications” (Yu, 2013, pp. 134).

3.2. Implications and Directions for Future Research

This paper seeks to raise cultural awareness and encourage cultural sensitivity among foreign managers in multinational corporations, using the case of Puerto Rico, Mexico and United States to illustrate this. Globalization will continue to increase and people with very different linguistic backgrounds will continue to use English non-natively to communicate between each other. It is, thus, the responsibility of managers who are foreign to the country where they are based, to learn about the national culture, general business culture, specific corporate culture and individual communication styles. They have to develop this awareness and sensitivity in order to improve business communication and thus have effective job performance and profits in their organization or company.

In addition, the research pursues to reduce ethnocentric views and negative attitudes of foreign managers. Learning about the culture of the country will greatly help foreign managers to respect the culture and accept diversity. The study may help to point out the importance to simplify language discourse, such as limiting use of idiomatic expressions. This may help communication flow without misunderstanding and therefore achieve good production and results.

Future research can focus on expanding the topic of degree of local adaptation of both language groups to the local culture and corporate culture, and how the regulative pillar might lead the local culture to adapt to the corporate culture. In addition, a more detailed study can be carried out in terms of other factors that can lead to communication errors. The following outline for such a study would be an initial effort towards advancing the knowledge of the impact of the use of idioms in managerial communication on subordinate performance and effectiveness.
4. Results and Discussion

The first section constitutes a summary of the demographics and characteristics of the respondents. The second section corresponds to the hypothesis and research questions. A total of 332 questionnaires were obtained. Among these, 141 were males, 130 females and 62 non-responses. Regarding age, 3% were from 18-21 years, 46.5% from 22-30, 15% from 31-39, 8.8% from 40-49, 23% from 50-59 and 4% from 60-69. A total of 75.9% of respondents reported that knowledge of English was either important or very important for their professional careers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Major nationalities represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish-speaking Latin Americans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 161 (48.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With respect to education, 108 (32.4%) respondents had completed a bachelor degree, 66 (19.8%) had completed some master degree, 43 (12.9%) had completed an MBA, 16 (4.8%) had completed a doctoral degree.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4 Companies that the respondents worked for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>local (serves a regional market within a nation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>domestic (serves primarily one national market)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(replicates its home offering in overseas operations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>multinational (operates in several countries, exploits local opportunities and adapts accordingly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>global (centralized with worldwide operations and highly standardized offerings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transnational (highly integrated worldwide operations with differentiated offerings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed at the moment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With respect to the positions within their companies, respondents reported that they occupied were: top management (N=46, 17%), middle management (N=62, 18.6%), low management (N=60, 18%), entry level (N=60, 18%) and other positions (N=30, 9%). Of the total number of respondents (N=332), 270 people answered this questions leaving a missing value of
63. The person with whom respondents were mostly like to use English were with (1) supervisors (N=117, 35.1%), (2) with customers (N= 27, 8.1%) and (3) with suppliers (N=19, 8.1%).

The data collected was first adjusted for missing data (series means) normalized (Log10) to fall within acceptable ranges skewness (within -2 to 2.) Although the process reduced kurtosis, it did not bring it down to the aforementioned range for all variables. The hypothesis was stated as: The more non-native speakers are familiar with idioms, the more likely they are to have successful communications with native speakers [it is assumed that native speakers would have full command of the 25 idioms identified as the most important in this study]. Five questions were examined and tested to determine whether or not there was support for the overall hypothesis stated above. The null hypotheses were tested, (α= .05), using a directional testing where

\[ \begin{align*} H_0_{1.1} &\leq 3.0 \cdots \cdots \ H_0_{1.5} &\leq 3.0 \text{ and} \\ H_a_{1.1} &> 3.0 \cdots \cdots \ H_a_{1.5} &> 3.0 \end{align*} \]

The critical value (3.0) corresponds to “neutral” on the Likert scale. The results are the described in following sentences and the statistics are summarized in Table 5:

1. (Q#116) How important is English for your professional career? \( H_{0.116} \) = There is no evidence to support the statement that English is important for professional careers [in business]. Finding: There is no support for the null hypothesis; There is support for the hypothesis that English is important for professional careers [in business].

2. (Q#123) How important is it in your company to speak English to be able to reach top/senior management positions? \( H_{0.123} \) = It is not important in a company to speak English to be able to reach top/senior management positions. Finding: There is no support for the null hypothesis; There is support for the hypothesis that knowing English is important for reaching top/senior management positions.

3. (Q#126) Overall, how important do you consider the knowledge of idioms for your success in business? \( H_{0.126} \) = The knowledge of idioms is not important for success in business. Finding: There is no support for the null hypothesis; There is support for the hypothesis that a knowledge of idioms is important for success in business.

4. (Q#131) Overall, the 25 business idioms included in the list are important: \( H_{0.131} \) = The 25 business idioms included in the list in this study are not important. There is no support for the null hypothesis; There is support for the hypothesis that the 25 business idioms included in the list in this study are important.
5. (Q#132) Overall, the benefits of knowing business idioms are important. Ho.132 = Overall, the benefits of knowing business idioms are not important [for communicating with native English speakers]. Finding: There is no support for the null hypothesis; There is support for the hypothesis that, overall, the benefits of knowing business idioms are important [for communicating with native English speakers].

The findings are summarized in Table 5:

Table 5 Importance of English and Idioms for Business

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of English and Idioms facilitate communication with native English speakers in business settings (N=332)</th>
<th>Critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missing Values</td>
<td>Critical Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-t-test at one-tail, .05 Sig./2* Hypoth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Q#116. Importance of English and Idioms for professional career in business
   61  4.528  45.198  1.64  0.000  Ha

2. Q#123. Importance of English/idioms for obtaining top/senior positions
   66  4.244  26.135  1.64  0.000  Ha

3. Q#126 Overall the knowledge of idioms is important to communicate in business
   78  4.059  20.402  1.64  0.000  Ha

4. Q#131. The 25 idioms in the list are important
   60  3.238  7.911  1.64  0.000  Ha

5. Q#132. The benefits of knowing idioms are important
   62  3.874  18.336  1.64  0.000  Ha

* Sig./2 must be less than .05 for one-tail test support of the alternative hypothesis at 95% level of confidence

Ho = the null hypothesis (Idioms are not useful, important, beneficial for business communications, particularly with native speakers)

Ha = (Idioms are useful, important, beneficial for business communications, particularly with native speakers)

Thus, the five questions we explored support, in one way or another, the importance for non-native speakers of English of knowing English/ idioms to have successful communication in English, particularly with native speakers.
The following section deals with the research questions.

1. **Which idioms are respondents most likely to recognize?**

   Descriptive statistics (means and score totals) were used to identify the most the idioms respondents reported that they were most likely to recognize. The findings are presented in Table 6.

   **Table 6: Idiomatic Expressions: Ranked Most to Least Recognized in Business Communications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Idiom</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>Score Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Murphy's Law</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>You need to read between the lines</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>You can’t teach an old dog new tricks</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The light at the end of the tunnel</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Save your pennies for a rainy day</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Apples and oranges</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Give me a ballpark figure</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Don’t put all your eggs in one basket</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Just for the record</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>To get lost in translation</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>To know the ropes</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
* Refers to the Lickert scale questionnaire where summarized here:

Understood = I have heard this, and I know what it means
An idea = I have heard this and I have an idea of what it means
Heard before = I have heard this, but I am not sure what it means
Don’t know = I may have heard this, but I do not know what it means
Never heard = I have never heard this before.

2. **Which idioms are respondents most likely to use/employ?**

Descriptive statistics (means and score totals) were used to identify the most the idioms respondents reported that they were most likely to employ in their business communications. The findings are presented in Table 7:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idiom</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Q#</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Interpretation*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 To save face</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>Frequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 A piece of cake</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>Frequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Give them an inch and they’ll take a mile</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>Frequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 To keep your fingers crossed</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>Frequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Don’t rock the boat</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>Frequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Don’t burn your bridges</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Speak the same language</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Wing it</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 To lose face</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 What goes around, comes around</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 To see eye to eye</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Bottom line</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>Infrequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 The last straw</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>Infrequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Just for the record</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>Infrequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Loophole</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>Infrequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Apples and Oranges</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>An idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 To know the ropes</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>An idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 To get lost in translation</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>An idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 You need to read between the lines</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>An idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Murphy’s law</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>Infrequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiom</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Q#</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Interpretation*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  Don’t burn your bridges</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>Easy E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  To save face</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>Easy E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Give them an inch and they’ll take a mile</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>Easy E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Wing it</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>Easy E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Keep your fingers crossed</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>Easy E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Speak the same language</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>Easy E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Don’t rock the boat</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>Explainable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  Loophole</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>Explainable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9  Murphy’s law</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>Explainable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 A piece of cake</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>Explainable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 What goes around comes around</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>Explainable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Bottom line</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>Explainable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 The last straw</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>Explainable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Which idioms to respondents perceive as the most important for their business communication?

Descriptive statistics (means and score totals) were used to identify the most the idioms that respondents perceived to be most important for their business communications. The findings are presented in Table 9.

Table 9 Idiomatic Expressions: Ranked Most to Least Important

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idiom</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Q#</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Interpretation*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A piece of cake</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep your fingers crossed</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak the same language</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t rock the boat</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t burn your bridges</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see eye to eye</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>Understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Idiom</td>
<td>Rating</td>
<td>Importance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bottom line</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>To lose face</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>To save face</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The last straw</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Wing it</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Give them an inch and they'll take a mile</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>What goes around comes around</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Loophole</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Don’t put all your eggs in one basket</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Just for the record</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Apples and oranges</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>To know the ropes</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Murphy’s law</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Save your pennies for a rainy day</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>You need to read between the lines</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The light at the end of the tunnel</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>You can’t teach an old dog new tricks</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Give me a ball park figure</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>To get lost in translation</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Refers to the Lickert scale questionnaire where summarized here:

V. Imp. = Very important.

Important = Important.

Somewhat = Somewhat important.

Not imp. = Not important.

Not I. = Absolutely not important

5. **Which benefits derived from knowledge of idiomatic expressions do respondents perceive as most important/salient/outstanding?**

Regression analysis (entry method at a 95% level of confidence) was used to predict the benefits that non-native speakers would derive if they acquired a command of English idioms. The benefits (treated as independent variables) were rated by respondents from “very important,” “somewhat important,” “neutral”, “somewhat important” and to “very unimportant” on
a five-point Lickert scale with the highest value corresponding to “very important.” These benefits consisted of, (1) efficient communication, (2) effective communication/exchange of ideas, (3) easier communication in multicultural settings, (4) facilitated negotiations, (5) enhanced conflict resolution, (6) improved interpersonal relationships, (7) strengthened leadership skills, (8) faster climbing of the corporate ladder, (9) greater frequency of salary raises, (10) increased earning power, (11) increased self-esteem, (12) overall job satisfaction, and (13) greater overall job productivity. The Dependent variable was the value used to rate the overall benefits or perceptions of usefulness associated with a knowledge of idiomatic expressions. The beta coefficients were used to rank the benefits in order of perceived importance. Before performing the test, the database was adjusted for missing data (series means) normalized (Log10) to fall within acceptable ranges skewness (within -2 to 2.)

All variables except “increased self-esteem” entered into the equation The adjusted R-square was .723. The Durbin-Watson post-hoc statistic was 1.794. The significant benefits are summarized, in descending order of importance, in Table 10:

Table 10 Most likely Business-related Benefits Derived from a Command of English Idioms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Significance*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Greater overall job productivity</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Effective communication/exchange of ideas</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>.178</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Strengthened leadership skills</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Easier communication in multicultural settings</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Greater overall job satisfaction</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Improved personal relationships</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Facilitated negotiations</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>-.059</td>
<td>.047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Non-significant benefits (p ≥ .05) were not included.

Efficient/fast communication, faster climbing of the corporate ladder, greater frequency of salary raises, and increased earning power were not significant benefits.

6. **Is there any perceived relationship between knowledge of business idiomatic expressions and:**

Pearson’s “r” was calculated for the variable that measured the deepest knowledge (ability to explain) and no significant relationship was uncovered with perceptions of self-esteem, job satisfaction and job productivity. The results were analyzed using the “Rule of Thumb Table” as follows:

Rules of Thumb about Correlation Coefficient Size
Coefficient Range | Strength of Association
---|---
± .81 to ± 1.00 | Strong
± .61 to ± .80 | Moderate
± .41 to ± .60 | Weak
± .21 to ± .40 | Very Weak
± .00 to ± .20 | None

*Source: Burns & Bush, 1998, p.552*

The results were:

a. Knowledge of Idioms and Self-esteem:

b. Greater job satisfaction: Same as above: Person’s r. Interpret with above guidelines.

c. Greater job productivity: Pearson’s r, again.

As this is an on-going research, the remaining results and discussion will be expanded once we have completed all analysis of data retrieved.

5. **Conclusions**

**Assumptions, Limitations and Recommendations**

There are several limitations observed at this stage. The experts completed the survey which displayed the idioms in the same exact order. As pointed out above, some of the judges manifested fatigue halfway through the survey. This fatigue could have affected the rating judges gave to the idioms. Some of the judges might have not even paid closed attention to the idioms placed at the end of the list in the survey. One recommendation at this stage is to have two surveys in which the idioms are placed in different orders in each one; then administer one survey to half the judges, and then the second survey to the other half. This would guarantee a more accurate selection of the most used idioms. Also, increasing the number of judges would have also provided a more reliable result in terms of the 25 most important idioms.

The self-reporting method is always subject to the limitations that respondents may not report their true perceptions or may report flawed perceptions based on imperfect recall. The measures of perceptions regarding idiomatic expressions are also described as “soft” measures that linked with performance from the respondents’ perspective.
The idioms studied were a partial list of all the idioms identified; many were eliminated to have a reasonable-length questionnaire that would not lead to respondent resistance and/or fatigue.

The cross-sectional design was a result of time limitation. A longitudinal design, spanning a greater period of time, may be more appropriate for understanding the role of idiomatic expressions in business. Also, as language evolves, expressions can also be expected to evolve. This aspect was not addressed in this study.

As future research, additional assessments of a similar nature can be used with control groups, and in similar designs pairing manager-subordinate dyads to test for more specific effects and to further refine the recommendations for improving the intercultural communication process in multinational firms.

References


