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Patterns and Progress in Idiom Use: A Longitudinal Analysis of Thai EFL Learners' Writing

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study examines the developmental patterns of English idiomatic expression use in the written productions of Thai EFL learners over three academic years (2022–2024). The objectives were to determine the extent of idiom use, identify frequency patterns, and track changes in usage over time. Analyzing 464 essays from 58 undergraduate students, the study employed content analysis to classify idioms into five types: opaque, transparent, semi-transparent, phrasal verbs, and proverbs. A total of 771 idiomatic instances were identified, with 525 unique expressions remaining after eliminating repetitions. The findings revealed a quantitative increase in idiom use over time, with transparent idioms and phrasal verbs being the most prevalent, while proverbs were the least used. However, this growth was not accompanied by qualitative improvements in accuracy or sophistication. Students consistently favored simpler, more transparent idioms (e.g., “break the ice”) over opaque or culturally nuanced ones (e.g., “spill the beans”), reflecting cognitive and cultural challenges. The study highlights the need for explicit instruction to enhance idiomatic competence, as prolonged exposure alone proved insufficient for mastering figurative language. These results align with prior research on EFL learners’ preference for high-frequency, analyzable idioms and underscore the importance of targeted pedagogical strategies to foster deeper idiomatic proficiency. The study contributes to the understanding of idiom acquisition in Thai EFL contexts and offers practical implications for language instruction.

Keywords: Idiomatic Expressions; L2 Writing Development; Longitudinal Study; Thai EFL Students

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1. Introduction

An idiom is an expression the meaning of which cannot be taken literally from the normal meaning of individual parts forming it. That being so, non-native English speakers, in particular learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), find it difficult to understand them^[1]. Being competent in idiomatic expressions is vital for presenting ideas that often entail figurative language, especially in academic settings^[2].

While several studies have examined Thai EFL learners' proficiency in English idiomatic expressions, most focus on learners' ability to identify correct idioms through comprehension tests. Others interpret English idioms as equivalents to Thai expressions^[3, 4]. Most existing research tends to overlook the practical application of idiomatic expressions in authentic writing contexts, specifically how Thai EFL students incorporate these idiomatic phrases in their essays^[5]. This lack of investigation creates a significant gap in the literature regarding the extent to which Thai EFL learners utilize idiomatic expressions in their writing, the specific types of idioms employed, and the overall patterns of usage over time. Such insights are crucial, as they inform educators about the linguistic challenges faced by learners and the effectiveness of teaching methods in this area.

Moreover, understanding idiomatic usage can reveal not only the learners' language proficiency but also their cultural comprehension and adaptability in utilizing idiomatic expressions effectively. The findings from this study aim to illuminate the typical use of idiomatic expressions by Thai EFL learners, providing a comprehensive view of idiomatic usage across different essay topics and over an extended period. This research hopes to contribute to the body of literature on phraseology and idiomatic expressions in Asian and particularly Thai EFL contexts, enhancing both theoretical understanding and practical applications in language education^[6]. The study's insights could foster more effective instructional strategies to support EFL learners in mastering idiomatic expressions, which are often seen as a hallmark of linguistic proficiency.

For the sake of a better understanding of the longitudinal development of idiomatic expressions in L2 writing, the investigators followed a group of 58 Thai EFL students over the course of three years, two and a half academic years, analyzing all of their essays as part of the midterm and final examinations of the first and second terms of each academic

year. This longitudinal study focuses on the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Thai EFL students use English idiomatic expressions in their written productions?
2. What are the patterns observed in the frequency of English idiomatic expressions used by Thai EFL students?
3. How does the use of English idiomatic expressions in the students' written productions develop and change over the course of their three years of study?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions

An idiom, also called an idiomatic expression, is a fixed phrase whose overall meaning cannot be understood just by looking at the individual words. Instead, idioms have a figurative or culturally specific meaning that is different from their literal sense. For example, "kick the bucket" does not mean to hit a bucket with your foot; it means "to die." Similarly, "spill the beans" does not mean to drop beans; it means "to reveal a secret." Because idioms depend on shared cultural or language knowledge, their meanings can be difficult for people who are not familiar with the language. Over time, these phrases become common in language and their figurative meanings are widely understood. Whether called idioms or idiomatic expressions, they serve the same purpose: to communicate ideas that go beyond the literal words^[7].

2.2. The Importance of Idiomatic Expressions for L2 Learners

Idiomatic expressions, also known as multiword expressions, are a vital component of language that play a fundamental role in language use, understanding, and learning^[8, 9]. Martinez and Schmidt^[10] outline four key reasons for the significance of idiomatic expressions. First, they are widely used, accounting for 20–50% of spoken and written discourse. Second, they convey specific meanings and functions; for example, "*on the other hand*" signals contrast, while "*watch out*" acts as a warning. Third, they provide processing advantages, as they are understood and processed faster than word-by-word phrases^[11]. This enhances overall communication skills^[12]. Lastly, possessing knowledge

of idioms contributes to a more impressive and native-like language production in second language (L2) learners^[13]. Acquiring idiomatic knowledge thus provides L2 learners with several advantages, including improved communicative competence^[14, 15].

2.3. Classification of Idioms

Moon^[16] classifies idioms, based on their semantics, into three types: transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque metaphors. Transparent idioms, like “*to feel like a fish out of water*” or “*a stab in the back*”, have meanings that are easily inferred from their literal images^[8]. Semi-transparent idioms, such as “*break the ice*”, have a less direct link between literal and figurative meanings^[9]. Opaque idioms, like “*kick the bucket*” or “*spill the beans*”, require knowledge of their history or etymology to understand, as their meanings are not deducible from the words alone^[10].

Similarly, Mäntylä^[17] categorizes idioms into three types based on transparency: transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque. Transparent idioms have closely linked literal and figurative meanings; semi-transparent idioms have a relation but are less clear; opaque idioms have completely different literal and figurative meanings. Language learners are expected to grasp some less common idiomatic expressions.

Fernando^[18] also divides idioms into three groups: pure, semi-idioms, and literal idioms. Pure idioms are fixed, non-literal expressions whose meanings cannot be inferred from their individual words, such as “spill the beans”. Semi-idioms contain at least one literal and one non-literal element, such as “foot the bill,” where “foot” is non-literal. Literal idioms, like “on foot,” are easier to understand because their meanings are straightforward and semantically simple.

2.4. Phrasal Verbs as Idioms

Another key question is whether phrasal verbs (e.g., fall through or put up with) qualify as idioms. Phrasal verbs are considered idioms because their meanings often cannot be deduced from the individual words that compose them, exhibiting the core characteristic of idiomaticity—non-compositionality^[19]. For example, give up (surrender) or run into (meet unexpectedly) derive their meanings from conventional usage rather than literal interpretation, much

like traditional idioms such as kick the bucket. Additionally, phrasal verbs display structural fixedness—altering the particle often changes or destroys the meaning (e.g., give up vs. give in). Scholars like Fernando^[18] argue that unpredictability and metaphorical basis align phrasal verbs with idiomatic expressions, even though they function grammatically as verb phrases. Thus, while not all phrasal verbs are opaque (e.g., sit down), those with non-literal meanings undeniably belong to the broader category of idioms.

2.5. Proverbs as Idioms

Most scholars recognize proverbs as a type of idiom or at least closely related to idiomatic expressions due to their fixed form, figurative meaning, and conventionalized usage^[16, 18]. While idioms typically function as phrasal constituents (e.g., spill the beans), proverbs are complete utterances that convey wisdom or cultural truths (e.g., Don’t count your chickens before they hatch). However, their shared reliance on non-literal interpretation and resistance to syntactic modification aligns them with broader idiomatic language. Some linguists, such as Fernando^[18], categorize proverbs under literal idioms when their meaning remains transparent, whereas others treat them as a distinct yet overlapping category within fixed expressions^[17]. Ultimately, the consensus is that proverbs exhibit core idiomatic traits, even if their discursive and didactic functions set them apart in practical usage.

Although Moon^[16], Mäntylä^[17], and Fernando^[18] are older sources, their classifications of idioms remain foundational and widely cited in contemporary linguistics, SLA, and cognitive studies. Moon’s transparency-based typology (transparent/semi-transparent/opaque) and Fernando’s functional categories (pure/semi-/literal idioms) continue to underpin modern research on idiom processing^[20], while Mäntylä’s work aligns with psycholinguistic investigations into figurative language^[21]. Their frameworks endure because they offer empirically validated distinctions—critical for analyzing phrasal verbs idiomaticity or proverbs figurative fixedness—making them indispensable to the present study’s five-type classification. While newer studies refine these models (e.g., gradient transparency in NLP)^[22], these scholars’ contributions remain authoritative references for idiom analysis.

For this study, the researcher categorizes idiomatic

expressions into five types: opaque, transparent, semi-transparent, phrasal verbs, and proverbs. Building on prior classifications by Moon^[16], Mäntylä^[17], and Fernando^[18], this framework recognizes idioms based on their transparency and fixedness. Phrasal verbs are included due to their non-compositional, idiomatic meanings. Proverbs are treated as a separate category because of their fixed, figurative nature and cultural significance. This classification aims to comprehensively capture the diversity of idiomatic expressions relevant to the study, providing a structured approach to analyzing their usage and interpretation.

2.6. Idiom Use in L2 Writing

Research consistently indicates that L2 learners tend to use idiomatic expressions sparingly in their writing, often due to various linguistic and cultural challenges. Cooper^[1] argues that idioms are complex linguistic features that require a high level of lexical and cultural competence, which many learners have yet to develop, leading to limited usage. Liu^[23] emphasizes that the opacity of many idioms poses significant comprehension difficulties, discouraging learners from attempting to incorporate them into their writing. Liontas^[24] highlights that L2 learners often prefer to rely on more straightforward language forms, avoiding idiomatic expressions unless they are highly familiar or transparent, which reduces their frequency of use. Similarly, Nippold and Martin^[25] note that limited exposure and practice with idioms result in their sparse appearance in learner texts. Webb and Chang^[26] further suggest that pedagogical emphasis on explicit instruction of idioms can enhance learners' willingness and ability to use them, though overall, their spontaneous use remains relatively low. Collectively, these studies underscore that the sparing use of idioms by L2 learners in writing stems from their perceived difficulty, limited exposure, and cultural unfamiliarity, which hinder their integration into learner language.

2.7. Patterns of Idiom Use in L2 Learners' Written Production

Previous research has explored various patterns of idiom use in L2 learners' written production, often highlighting preferences for certain types of idioms over others. Cieřlicka^[27] found that L2 learners tend to favor transparent

and compositional idioms, which are easier to understand and produce, while opaque idioms are less frequently used due to their figurative complexity. Gomez^[28] reported that learners more commonly incorporate familiar, lexicalized idioms in their writing, whereas novel or less-known idioms are infrequent. Laufer^[29] observed that idioms with clear, literal meanings are more accessible, leading to higher usage rates compared to highly figurative expressions. Researchers^[30] noted that idioms related to everyday contexts are more prevalent in learner texts, aligning with their experiential familiarity. Zhao and Huang^[31] found that idioms from familiar cultural domains are more likely to appear, though overall, the diversity of idiom types used remains limited. Boers and Demescheleer^[32] highlighted that learners tend to prefer idioms that are lexicalized and less figuratively complex, supporting Schmitt's^[33] notion that frequency and transparency influence idiom selection. Na Ranong^[34] confirmed that less frequent, opaque idioms are rarely found in learner writing, indicating a tendency to stick with more accessible idiomatic expressions. Recent studies focusing specifically on Thai EFL learners have further underscored these patterns; for example, Siengsanoh^[5] found that Thai learners predominantly use idioms that are culturally familiar and lexically simple in their writing, with limited use of idioms requiring deeper cultural or contextual understanding. Similarly, studies pertaining to Thai EFL students' idiom ability^[6, 35] reported that Thai EFL students tend to favor idioms that are transparent and frequently encountered in their language exposure, although some students have begun to experiment with more complex idioms as their proficiency improves. Overall, research suggests that L2 learners predominantly use transparent, familiar, and lexicalized idioms, with less frequent use of opaque or culturally specific idioms in their written production.

2.8. Longitudinal Development in L2 Writing

Research indicates that while L2 learners tend to increase their overall use of idioms over extended periods of language learning, this growth does not necessarily correspond to improvements in idiomatic proficiency or quality. Li and Schmitt^[36] found that learners' idiom production rises with increased exposure and practice, reflecting a quantitative growth in idiom use. However, the quality and appropriateness of these idioms often remain limited, with learners

frequently relying on familiar, formulaic expressions rather than contextually suitable or nuanced idiomatic language. Kaya and Yilmaz^[37] further support this, reporting that although learners incorporate more idioms over time, their usage often lacks sophistication, contextual accuracy, and proper integration into discourse. Consequently, increased idiom use among L2 learners appears to reflect familiarity and frequency rather than enhanced idiomatic competence, highlighting the need for targeted instruction to improve idiomatic quality alongside quantity.

Despite this general trend, few studies have systematically tracked idiom development in L2 writing over extended periods, yet existing evidence points to a nonlinear progression. For example, Chen and Lai^[38] analyzed EFL learners' essays and found that idiom density (idioms per 1,000 words) increased after prolonged instruction but later plateaued, possibly due to avoidance strategies identified by Laufer and Waldman^[39]. Similarly, Recent authors like Boers^[20] confirmed Laufer's findings with newer data that advanced learners often over-monitor their idiom use, leading to hypercorrection or unnatural phrasing. These findings underscore the importance of longitudinal, production-focused research—such as the present investigation of Thai EFL writers—to better understand how idiom use evolves across proficiency stages and writing genres, and to identify strategies that promote both accuracy and naturalness over time.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

This study employs a longitudinal descriptive research design to examine the use of idiomatic expressions in students' written productions over time. According to Brown and Rodgers^[40], descriptive research aims to systematically explore and characterize individuals' traits, perceptions, and behaviors. In line with this, the present study focuses on analyzing the frequency and patterns of idiomatic expression usage in a corpus of 464 student essays. The data were collected across three academic years (2022–2024), tracking a cohort of 58 students.

Written samples were gathered at eight distinct time points, beginning in the second term of the students' second academic year (2022) and concluding after the first term of their fourth academic year (2024). This longitudinal ap-

proach allows for the observation of developmental trends and changes in idiomatic usage throughout the students' academic progression.

3.2. Data Collection

The primary data source consists of 464 compositions obtained from the writing sections of midterm and final examinations between 2022–2024. All direct identifiers (names, IDs) were removed and replaced with untraceable codes prior to analysis. As the essays constituted pre-existing, de-identified assessment materials (originally produced for routine academic evaluation), this study qualified for exemption from ethical approval and participant consent under institutional and international guidelines for secondary data research. The dataset provided standardized, comparable samples of writing development without compromising participant confidentiality.

Students' Background

The study tracked 58 Thai undergraduate students (predominantly female) enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts program with a major in English. Participants' proficiency averaged B1 (CEFR) at the study's outset, as assessed by institutional placement tests. Instruction occurred in a Thai university setting, where the curriculum emphasized general English skills, academic writing, and communicative competence. Idiomatic expressions were occasionally integrated into coursework but were not systematically taught. This context aligns with typical Thai EFL environments, where explicit idiom instruction is limited despite its importance for advanced proficiency^[6, 35].

3.3. Data Analysis

The corpus data analysis followed a rigorous multi-phase protocol, ensuring reliability and transparency:

1. Identification and Categorization:

All 464 essays were carefully examined to identify idiomatic expressions. These expressions were then categorized into five types: opaque idioms, semi-transparent idioms, transparent idioms, phrasal verbs, and proverbs.

2. Verification of Idiomatic Expressions:

To ensure accuracy, the identified idiomatic expressions were cross-checked against authoritative sources, including

the Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs^[41], Oxford Dictionary of Idioms^[42], Cassell Dictionary of Proverbs^[43] and reputable online databases like <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/>. This verification process involved trained coders working independently, with discrepancies resolved through consensus.

3. Compilation of Data:

All identified idiomatic expressions, along with their categories, were documented systematically in a shared database, including the essay number and student pseudonym to ensure traceability. The coding decisions, including any discrepancies and their resolutions, were recorded in detailed memos to enhance transparency. This process ensures that the analysis is both reliable and replicable, despite involving only two coders.

4. Frequency Analysis:

The frequency of each idiomatic expression type was calculated using Arikunto's^[44] percentage formula:

$$P = \frac{f}{N} \times 100\% \quad (1)$$

where P represents the percentage, f is the frequency of a particular idiom type, and N is the total number of idiomatic expressions identified. Each idiom was counted individually, with within-essay repetitions counted only once, and variations of the same phrasal verb in different tenses considered as a single instance. Repetitions across different essays were

counted separately.

5. Coding Protocol and Inter-rater Reliability:

The two researchers followed a detailed coding protocol established prior to analysis. Both underwent training sessions to ensure consistent application of the identification and categorization criteria. To assess reliability, both researchers independently coded a subset of 50 essays, and Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated, resulting in a value of 0.85, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were discussed, and the coding protocol was refined accordingly. For the remaining essays, one researcher conducted the coding, with periodic cross-checks by the second researcher on random samples to maintain consistency.

4. Results

RQ1: To what extent do Thai EFL students use English idiomatic expressions in their written productions?

From a total of 464 essays written by students as part of their midterm and final exams during the second semester of the second academic year, the first and second semesters of the third academic year, and the first semester of the fourth academic year, a total of 771 English idiomatic expressions were identified (See **Table 1**). Of these, 246 expressions were duplicates, resulting in 525 unique expressions being counted.

Table 1. Use of English Idiomatic Expressions by Type across Three Years.

Year	Idiom Types					Total
	Opaque	Semi-Transparent	Transparent	Phrasal Verb	Proverb	
1	6 (6.97%)	2 (2.32 %)	42 (48.83%)	35 (40.69%)	1 (1.16 %)	86
2	9 (6.56%)	11 (8.02%)	60 (43.79%)	55 (40.14%)	2 (1.45%)	137
3	14 (4.63 %)	34 (11.25 %)	131 (43.37 %)	121 (40.06 %)	2 (0.66 %)	302
Total	29 (5.52 %)	47 (8.95 %)	231 (44.00 %)	211 (40.19 %)	5 (0.95%)	525 (100.00%)

Table 1 reveals a significant increase in the use of English idiomatic expressions in students' essays over three years, rising from 86 in Year 1 to 525 in Year 3. Transparent expressions were the most frequently used, consistently comprising about 44% of expressions across all years, while opaque expressions were the least utilized. Phrasal verbs showed steady growth, indicating increased familiarity with this type of idiom. In terms of yearly trends, Year 1 displayed lower totals and a reliance on simpler expressions. By Year

2, there was an increase in both the total number of idiomatic expressions and their diversity. Year 3 marked a significant expansion in the variety of idiomatic expressions used. The overview reveals that a total of 525 idiomatic expressions were used in students' essays over three years, which indicates a relatively low level of usage. This averages to about 9 expressions per person, or just 3 expressions per essay. This data highlights that while Thai university EFL students do utilize idiomatic expressions in their writing, there is a

clear preference for more transparent and easily understandable forms. The increase in the total number of expressions over the years suggests a growing confidence or skill in using idiomatic language, though the overall usage remains modest.

RQ2: What are the patterns observed in the fre-

quency of English idiomatic expressions used by Thai EFL students?

1. Use of English idiomatic expressions in year 1

116 essays written by the students in the first year were analyzed, and a total of 188 IEs were found, with transparent idioms being the majority as indicated in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Frequency of idiom types found in the first-year essays.

Idiom Type	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Opaque idioms	15	7.97	4
Semi-transparent idioms	26	13.82	3
Transparent idioms	89	47.34	1
Phrasal verbs	57	30.31	2
Proverbs	1	0.531	5
Total	188	100.00	

Transparent idioms emerged as the most prevalent category, with 89 occurrences, accounting for 47.34% of the total, securing the highest rank. Phrasal verbs were the second most frequently used, appearing 57 times and representing 30.31% of the data. Semi-transparent idioms ranked third, with 26 instances (13.82%), followed by opaque idioms, which accounted for 15 occurrences (7.97%) and ranked fourth. Proverbs were the least common, with only a single instance, representing 0.53% of the total and ranking fifth,

and this is “*from small beginnings come great things*”. These findings highlight the predominance of transparent idioms and phrasal verbs in the analyzed texts, suggesting a preference for more straightforward and commonly understood idiomatic expressions.

2. Use of English idiomatic expressions in Year 2.

232 essays were analyzed, and it was found that transparent idioms emerged as the most frequently used ones, as detailed in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Frequency of idiom types found in the second-year essays.

Idiom Type	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Opaque idioms	11	3.90	4
Semi-transparent idioms	21	7.44	3
Transparent idioms	137	48.58	1
Phrasal verbs	111	39.36	2
Proverbs	2	0.70	5
Total	282	100.00	

Transparent idioms were the most common, with 137 instances (48.58%), followed by phrasal verbs with 111 occurrences (39.36%). Semi-transparent idioms ranked third with 21 instances (7.47%), while opaque idioms and proverbs were the least frequent, with 11 (3.90%) and 2 (0.70%) occurrences, respectively. The two proverbs found were “*You can’t teach an old dog new tricks*”, and “*A tree is known by its fruit*”. This distribution highlights the dominance of

transparent idioms and phrasal verbs used in the students’ essays.

3. Use of English idiomatic expressions in Year 3

116 essays written as part of the midterm and final examinations in the first semester of academic year 2024 were analyzed. It was found that 302 expressions were used, with transparent idioms emerged as the most frequently used ones, as depicted in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Frequency of idiom types found in the third-year essays.

Idiom Type	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Opaque idioms	14	4.63	3
Semi-transparent idioms	34	11.25	4
Transparent idioms	131	43.37	1
Phrasal verbs	121	40.06	2
Proverbs	2	0.66	5
Total	302	100.00	

Table 4 reveals that transparent idioms were the most prevalent, with 131 instances, accounting for 43.37% of the total, followed by phrasal verbs with 121 occurrences (40.06%). Opaque idioms ranked third, appearing 14 times (4.63%), while semi-transparent idioms ranked fourth, with 34 occurrences (11.25%). Proverbs were the least common, with only 2 instances, representing 0.66%. The two proverbs were “*Don’t judge a book by its cover*”, and “*An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*”. Overall, the data reflects the students’ intermediate-level proficiency in id-

iomatic usage, favoring expressions that are accessible and commonly used, while avoiding those requiring advanced linguistic and cultural competence.

RQ3: How does the use of English idiomatic expressions in the students’ written productions develop and change over the course of their three years of study?

A detailed analysis of the frequency and percentage changes in different types of idiomatic expressions used by students in their written productions over a three-year period reveals the key observations (See **Table 5**).

Table 5. Changes in Idiom Usage Frequency and Percentage from Year 1 to Year 3.

Idiom Type	Year 1		Year 3		Change	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Opaque idioms	15	7.97	14	4.63	1	0.86
Semi-transparent idioms	26	13.82	34	11.25	8	6.89
Transparent idioms	89	47.34	131	43.37	42	36.20
Phrasal verbs	57	30.31	121	40.06	64	55.17
Proverbs	1	0.53	2	0.66	1	0.86
	188	100	302	100	116	100.00

Opaque Idioms: There is a noticeable decline in the frequency of opaque idioms from Year 1 (15 occurrences, 7.97%) to Year 3 (14 occurrences, 4.63%). However, the percentage change is relatively small, and this indicates that this category remains somewhat consistent in its usage, albeit slightly less prevalent.

Semi-Transparent Idioms: The frequency of semi-transparent idioms increases significantly, from 26 occurrences (13.82%) in Year 1 to 34 occurrences (11.25%) in Year 3. This category’s increase in percentage (6.89%) suggests a steady adoption of semi-transparent idioms as the students’ progress through their studies.

Transparent Idioms: Transparent idioms experience the most notable increase, both in frequency (from 89 occurrences, 47.34%, to 131 occurrences, 43.37%) and percentage (36.20%). This suggests that students are increasingly using transparent idioms, possibly reflecting a growing familiarity

with idiomatic expressions that are easier to understand and integrate into their writing.

Phrasal Verbs: Phrasal verbs also see a substantial rise in both frequency (from 57 occurrences, 30.31%, to 121 occurrences, 40.06%) and percentage (55.17%). This large growth indicates that phrasal verbs become a more prominent feature in students’ written English over time, likely due to their practical utility and frequent use in everyday language.

Proverbs: The usage of proverbs remains relatively low but stable, with a slight increase from 1 occurrence (0.53%) in Year 1 to 2 occurrences (0.66%) in Year 3. This minimal change suggests that proverbs are less likely to be used in student writing compared to other idiomatic expressions.

Overall, the table shows a clear developmental trend in the use of idiomatic expressions in the students’ written productions, with a marked increase in the usage of phrasal verbs and transparent idioms, and a smaller rise in semi-transparent

idioms. The shift towards more transparent and phrasal verb usage likely reflects the students' growing mastery of English idioms and their tendency to favor expressions that are easier to understand and incorporate into their writing.

5. Discussion

This study examined the development of Thai EFL students' use of English idiomatic expressions over three years, focusing on patterns of usage and changes over time. The findings indicate that while students gradually incorporated more idiomatic expressions into their writing, the increase was uneven across different idiom types. Transparent idioms and phrasal verbs showed the most significant growth, whereas opaque idioms and proverbs remained underused. These results align with past research on idiom acquisition in EFL contexts, reinforcing the idea that learners tend to favor idioms with more transparent meanings while struggling with more figurative expressions.

The study's findings demonstrate that Thai EFL students used idiomatic expressions relatively infrequently, averaging just three idioms per essay, with a strong preference for transparent idioms and phrasal verbs over more complex opaque idioms and proverbs. While the overall quantity of idiom usage increased over the three-year study period, this growth was limited primarily to simpler, more transparent expressions, indicating no corresponding qualitative improvement in students' idiomatic competence. This pattern aligns with established cognitive theories of second language acquisition, particularly Abel's^[45] Cognitive Load Hypothesis, which explains learners' natural tendency to avoid linguistically and culturally complex expressions that demand greater interpretive effort. The minimal increase in semi-transparent idioms (from 26 to 34 instances) and virtually unchanged usage of opaque idioms (15 to 14 instances) reflect the significant challenges Thai learners face with culturally embedded expressions, as similarly documented in previous research^[30, 31].

Students consistently relied on transparent idioms like *"break the ice"* over opaque ones like *"spill the beans"*. This highlights the role of cognitive constraints and cultural unfamiliarity in idiom acquisition. Prior research^[1, 23, 35] confirms that EFL learners prefer idioms with concrete, literal meanings or direct L1 translations. In contrast, they struggle with abstract figurative language.

The current findings challenge the assumption that prolonged exposure alone enhances idiom competence, contradicting more optimistic perspectives from Nippold and Martin^[25] and Webb and Chang^[26]. Instead, they support Liontas'^[24] argument that explicit, targeted instruction is essential for developing idiomatic proficiency. These results highlight the need for pedagogical approaches that systematically address both the cognitive and cultural dimensions of idiomatic language through contrastive analysis, contextualized practice, and focused instruction in figurative interpretation to help learners move beyond their current reliance on simpler, more transparent expressions.

Collectively, these findings underscore the broader tendency^[32, 33] for learners to prioritize frequency and transparency in idiom selection. This results in limited diversity, with learners defaulting to accessible, formulaic expressions rather than venturing into nuanced or opaque idiomatic territory^[34].

The extremely limited use of proverbs in this study—with only five instances recorded across three years—can be attributed to several factors specific to Thai EFL learners. First, as Gibbs and Beitel^[46] suggest, proverbs require deep cultural familiarity that extends beyond linguistic competence, presenting a significant barrier for learners operating in a foreign language context. Thai students may struggle particularly with English proverbs because they often reflect Western cultural values, historical references, or literary traditions that differ markedly from Thai proverbial sayings. This cultural distance aligns with Boers and Demecheleer's^[32] finding that EFL learners naturally gravitate toward more flexible, contextually adaptable idioms rather than fixed proverb structures that demand precise cultural decoding.

Moreover, the study's writing context likely influenced this pattern. As Schmitt^[33] observed, EFL learners often perceive proverbs as archaic or excessively formal for academic writing, which may explain why Thai students avoided them in their essays. This tendency is compounded by instructional factors noted by Charteris-Black^[47]: without explicit classroom emphasis on proverbs—which are rarely prioritized in Thai EFL curricula—students lack both the confidence and the pragmatic knowledge to deploy them appropriately. The minimal year-to-year growth (1→2→2 instances) suggests that incidental exposure through general English instruction is insufficient for proverb acquisition, reinforcing the need

for targeted pedagogical intervention if educators wish to develop this aspect of figurative competence. The findings thus underscore how cultural, perceptual, and instructional factors collectively constrain proverb usage among Thai EFL learners, even after extended language study.

5.1. Increased Idiom Use, But Not in Quality

The study revealed an increase in Thai EFL students' use of English idioms over time, but this growth was primarily quantitative rather than qualitative. Most learners demonstrated an overreliance on well-known, transparent idioms while showing limited diversity in their idiomatic expressions. Notably, the phrase "for example" appeared 77 times (34% of all non-repeated idioms), while its equivalent "*for instance*" was used only 9 times (4%). Other overused transitional phrases included "such as" (36 instances, 16%) and "*in conclusion*" (34 instances, 15%). This pattern of repetitive idiom use suggests that learners have not developed native-like proficiency in idiomatic language, consistent with Li and Schmitt's (2009) findings that EFL learners typically incorporate idioms in only 2-5% of their writing—far below the 33-50% found in native speakers' compositions.

Several factors may explain this phenomenon in the Thai context. First, learners tend to depend heavily on familiar transitional phrases commonly encountered in academic texts and classroom instruction, as Thai EFL curricula often prioritize formulaic expressions for standardized testing^[48]. Second, their idiom repertoire appears limited to basic expressions frequently appearing in textbooks and media, as noted by Elkılıç^[49]. Third, learners show a clear preference for transparent idioms over more complex figurative expressions, a tendency also observed in a recent study^[50] of Thai university students, who avoided culturally unfamiliar idioms. This aligns with Kaya and Yilmaz's^[37] research on Turkish EFL learners, who similarly overused analyzable idioms while avoiding semi-literal and opaque ones. This pattern could be attributed to learners' limited knowledge of opaque idioms, whose meanings cannot be deduced from their components—a challenge compounded by the lack of explicit idiom instruction in many EFL settings^[35, 51].

The observed preference for transparent idioms and phrasal verbs among Thai EFL learners aligns closely with Cognitive Load Hypothesis^[51], which posits that learners naturally avoid linguistically complex expressions to reduce

processing demands. Transparent idioms (e.g., "*break the ice*") impose lower cognitive loads as their meanings are partially inferable from literal components, whereas opaque idioms (e.g., "*spill the beans*") require cultural and figurative knowledge that may overwhelm learners' working memory^[52]. This tendency is compounded by the Thai educational context, where curricula often prioritize formulaic expressions for standardized testing^[49] reinforcing reliance on simpler, high-frequency idioms. However, the plateau in idiom diversity after Year 2 suggests that prolonged exposure alone is insufficient to overcome cognitive barriers, supporting Liontas'^[24] argument that explicit instruction in figurative interpretation is critical for qualitative growth.

Alternative explanations for the limited idiom sophistication may include task constraints inherent to exam-based writing. As noted by previous research^[39], timed essays often elicit conservative language use, discouraging risk-taking with unfamiliar idioms. This aligns with Laufer and Waldman's^[39] findings that EFL learners over-monitor idiom use in high-stakes contexts, favoring accuracy over experimentation. Additionally, the lack of cultural congruence between Thai and English proverbs^[47, 51] may explain their near-absence in student writing, as learners avoid expressions without L1 parallels. Future studies could disentangle these factors by comparing idiom use across task types (e.g., creative vs. academic writing) and incorporating cultural familiarity metrics.

5.2. Suggestions for Implications

1. Explicit Instruction on Idiomatic Expressions

Given the students' preference for transparent idioms and phrasal verbs, instructors should not only provide explicit teaching of figurative and opaque idioms, emphasizing their meanings and contextual usage, but also introduce proverbs, which were nearly absent in student writing, through culturally relevant explanations and examples to enhance comprehension and retention. By actively engaging students with both opaque idioms and proverbs in a meaningful and contextualized manner, educators can foster a deeper understanding of figurative language, thereby enriching students' expressive capabilities and cultural insights.

2. Scaffolded Exposure and Practice

Since idiom acquisition is incremental, educators should incorporate structured exposure through reading ma-

terials, listening exercises, and writing tasks that encourage idiomatic diversity, while also implementing controlled and free-production activities—such as idiom journals, role-plays, and creative writing—that can help students move beyond reliance on overused transitional phrases. By combining these approaches, instructors can create a rich learning environment that promotes the effective understanding and application of a wide range of idiomatic expressions, ultimately enhancing students’ communicative competence and creativity in language use.

3. Focus on High-Frequency, Useful Idioms

Rather than overwhelming students with extensive idiom lists, instruction should prioritize high-frequency idioms that are commonly found in both academic and conversational English, and corpus-based approaches can play a crucial role in this process by identifying the most relevant idioms for learners at different proficiency levels. By focusing on these frequently used idiomatic expressions, educators can enhance students’ practical language skills and improve their ability to engage meaningfully in various contexts, thereby making idiom acquisition more manageable and effective.

4. Encouraging Idiomatic Risk-Taking

Students may avoid opaque idioms due to fear of misuse. Teachers should create a supportive learning environment where experimentation with idiomatic language is encouraged, and errors are treated as part of the learning process.

5. Integration of Multimedia and Authentic Materials

Since exposure to idioms in natural contexts aids acquisition, instructors should use films, TV shows, podcasts, and social media to demonstrate how idioms function in real-life communication.

6. Conclusions

This three-year study explored how Thai university students developed their use of English idiomatic expressions in essay writing. The findings revealed that while the students gradually used more idioms over time, their progress was largely quantitative rather than qualitative. The learners relied heavily on simple, transparent expressions like “for example” while rarely attempting complex or culturally nuanced idioms. These patterns indicate that typical English instruction in Thailand helps students recognize basic idioms. However, it fails to develop deeper figurative language skills.

To address this, teachers should prioritize meaningful practice with diverse idioms. They should also connect idioms to real-world contexts and encourage experimentation with challenging expressions.

6.1. Suggestions for Future Studies

Future research should examine long-term exposure (beyond three years) and include student reflections to understand evolving idiom comprehension. Comparing proficiency levels and incorporating teacher feedback can clarify skill development effects. Studies on teaching methods—explicit versus implicit, multimedia versus traditional—should gather qualitative data on learner preferences to identify effective strategies across cultures. Cross-linguistic comparisons (e.g., Thai vs. Vietnamese speakers) can reveal how L1 backgrounds influence idiom interpretation, informing corpus-based selection of key expressions. Psycholinguistic experiments might explore cognitive processing differences between transparent and opaque idioms, testing retention strategies like visual aids through mixed-methods. Additionally, evaluating digital tools—such as gamified platforms and AI feedback—should assess their effectiveness and real-world impact, with case studies focusing on motivation and accessibility.

6.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, its findings may lack generalizability due to the small sample of 58 Thai undergraduates from one university. Second, the quantitative focus on exam essays missed qualitative insights into learners’ cognitive processes and instructional influences. Third, the exclusive use of written exam data doesn’t reflect idiomatic use in spoken communication. The study also didn’t account for variations in teaching methods or individual learning strategies over time. Finally, the rigid idiom classification may oversimplify acquisition patterns, as cultural familiarity wasn’t systematically examined. These limitations suggest the need for more diverse, mixed-methods research.

Author Contribution

Conceptualization, D.D. and S.B.; methodology, D.D. and S.B.; software, D.D.; validation, D.D. and S.B.; formal analysis, D.D.; investigation, D.D. and S.B.; resources,

S.B.; data curation, D.D.; writing—original draft preparation, D.D.; writing—review and editing, S.B.; visualization, M.A.; supervision, D.D.; project administration, D.D.; funding acquisition, D.D. and S.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for this study, as it did not involve human participants or animal subjects. The analyzed essays were fully anonymized, with all direct identifiers (names, IDs) removed and replaced with untraceable random numbers, ensuring no linkage to student identities. Since the data consisted of past exam submissions originally collected for assessment purposes (not research) and the analysis focused solely on low-risk linguistic features (idiom usage), no ethical risks were present, aligning with exemptions for secondary analysis of pre-existing, non-identifiable data.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. Informed consent was not required for this study as it analyzed fully anonymized historical exam essays from an institutional repository. The data consisted solely of de-identified student writing samples collected during routine academic assessments, with all personal identifiers removed prior to analysis. Since the research involved no direct interaction with human subjects and examined only anonymized linguistic patterns, this study qualified for exemption from informed consent requirements under institutional ethical guidelines.

Data Availability Statement

The authors can provide the data supporting the findings of this study upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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