

The Role of Phraseological Units in Developing Communicative Fluency among University Students

¹ Sema Mehdi

<https://doi.org/10.69760/gsrh.0203025001>

Abstract:

This study examines the influence of phraseological units on the enhancement of communicative fluency in senior university students learning English as a foreign language. The research, conducted at Nakhchivan State University, featured 30 final-year students participating in a six-to-eight-week educational program centered on idioms, phrasal verbs, collocations, and fixed expressions. Data were gathered by pre- and post-assessments, oral interviews, written assignments, and observational checklists. The findings indicated a notable enhancement in phraseological competence and communicative fluency, as students exhibited increased lexical diversity, speaking fluency, and stylistic refinement in writing. The research suggests that focused phraseological education improves learners' capacity for natural and effective communication, providing practical implications for curriculum development and teaching methods.

Keywords

Phraseological Units, Communicative Fluency, English Language Teaching, University Students

I. Introduction

In the context of language education, communicative fluency remains one of the most sought-after competencies among university students, particularly those studying English as a foreign language (EFL). While vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy are often prioritized, the acquisition of phraseological units—idioms, collocations, fixed expressions, and phrasal verbs—is equally vital for achieving fluency that mirrors authentic native speaker use. These units are not only lexical in nature but also deeply embedded in cultural and pragmatic contexts, contributing significantly to learners' ability to comprehend and produce nuanced, natural-sounding speech (Cherno et al., 2020; Minoo, 2019).

Despite their importance, phraseological units are often underrepresented in standard curricula, especially at the tertiary level, where students are expected to refine their communicative skills for

¹ Mehdi, S. Nakhchivan State University. Email: sema_mehdi@ndu.edu.az. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8948-5074>.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

academic, social, and professional interactions. Research suggests that learners who master phraseological competence tend to exhibit higher levels of oral fluency, pragmatic awareness, and sociolinguistic appropriateness (Zhang, 2023; Dinevich et al., 2023). In particular, senior university students—those in their final years of study—must bridge the gap between academic proficiency and real-world language use. This gap can be addressed by strategically incorporating phraseological instruction into the language learning process.

The present study seeks to explore the impact of teaching phraseological units on the development of communicative fluency among senior university students. Building on previous findings related to idiom instruction (Mehdi, 2024) and learner-centered methods (Askarkyzy & Nurgalikyzy, 2024), this research further considers individual learning differences (Pashayeva, 2025) and the shift from traditional to communicative approaches (Naghiyeva, 2025). Furthermore, it acknowledges the role of critical thinking in facilitating effective language use (Bagirzada, 2025), proposing that phraseological awareness not only enhances fluency but also deepens cognitive engagement with language.

By investigating both the linguistic and pedagogical dimensions of phraseology in higher education, this article aims to provide empirical insights and practical recommendations for educators, curriculum designers, and language learners.

II. Theoretical Framework

Definition and Types of Phraseological Units

Phraseological units are fixed or semi-fixed expressions whose meanings often extend beyond the literal interpretation of their individual components. These include idioms (e.g., *kick the bucket*), phrasal verbs (e.g., *look up to*), collocations (e.g., *make a decision*), and fixed phrases (e.g., *as a matter of fact*). According to Minoos (2019), such units are integral to mastering the expressive depth of a language, allowing learners to go beyond structural correctness and achieve communicative authenticity.

Each type carries specific semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic properties. Idioms are typically non-transparent and culturally bound, requiring learners to infer meaning from context. Phrasal verbs, while more syntactically flexible, often pose difficulties due to their multiple meanings. Collocations, the habitual co-occurrence of words, support naturalness in speech, while fixed phrases serve important discourse functions, such as managing conversations and expressing agreement or disagreement (Aliyeva, 2024).

Communicative Fluency

Communicative fluency refers to the learner's ability to convey thoughts smoothly and appropriately within various contexts. It involves speed, coherence, lexical variety, and sociolinguistic appropriateness. As Chernov, Zyryano, and Vukolo (2020) argue, fluency is not solely a mechanical process but a cognitive-linguistic one shaped by a speaker's ability to access and use formulaic language rapidly and meaningfully. Fluency thus relies not only on vocabulary and grammar but also on phraseological knowledge that supports natural speech production.

Relationship between Phraseological Competence and Communicative Fluency

Phraseological competence is a crucial subcomponent of communicative competence. It encompasses both recognition and productive use of phraseological units in context. Research

indicates a strong correlation between learners' familiarity with phraseological units and their oral fluency, listening comprehension, and pragmatic abilities (Zhang, 2023; Dinevich et al., 2023). Students equipped with phraseological competence are more capable of avoiding hesitation, expressing themselves idiomatically, and engaging in authentic discourse.

Askarkyzy and Nurgalikyzy (2024) note that effective instruction in phraseological units enhances not only vocabulary retention but also functional language use, especially when combined with edutainment and communicative techniques. In this regard, phraseological instruction serves as both a linguistic and pedagogical strategy for fluency development.

Review of Previous Studies

A growing body of research emphasizes the value of integrating phraseological instruction into EFL programs. Mehdi (2024) explores techniques such as contextualization, storytelling, and visual aids to teach idioms, reporting significant gains in students' fluency and confidence. Chernov et al. (2020) focus on pragmatic competence, highlighting the importance of phraseology in forming culturally sensitive communication. Similarly, Pashayeva (2025) underscores that students' individual learning profiles impact their phraseological acquisition, necessitating differentiated instruction.

Moreover, Naghiyeva (2025) critiques the limitations of the grammar-translation method in fostering communicative competence, suggesting that phraseology-based activities better prepare learners for real-life interaction. Bagirzada (2025) supports this view, arguing that phraseological instruction also fosters critical thinking and cognitive flexibility, both of which are essential for advanced language proficiency.

Taken together, these studies affirm that phraseological units are not mere decorative elements of language but essential tools for achieving fluency, coherence, and communicative success among university students.

III. Methodology

Participants

The study involved a cohort of final-year university students majoring in English Language Teaching at Nakhchivan State University. A total of 30 students participated, aged between 21 and 23, all of whom had attained at least an upper-intermediate (B2) level of English proficiency according to the CEFR. These students were selected based on their academic standing and willingness to participate in the study.

Setting

The research was conducted at Nakhchivan State University during the spring semester of the 2025 academic year. Classes were held twice a week as part of a specialized elective course focused on phraseological language use. The environment provided an authentic academic context for the integration of phraseological instruction into ongoing language development efforts.

Instruments

To gather both qualitative and quantitative data on the impact of phraseological instruction, the following tools were utilized:

- **Pre- and Post-Tests:** Designed to assess students' recognition and use of phraseological units. The tests included multiple-choice questions, gap-fill exercises, and short composition tasks.
- **Oral Interviews and Presentations:** Conducted to evaluate the spontaneous use of phraseological expressions in spoken language. Students were required to prepare short presentations and participate in peer interviews on familiar topics.
- **Written Tasks:** Students submitted essays, reflections, and reports incorporating assigned phraseological units to evaluate productive written usage.
- **Observation Checklist:** Used by the instructor to monitor real-time use of phraseological units during class discussions, group work, and informal interactions.

Procedures

The instructional period lasted for **six to eight weeks**, during which students were systematically exposed to various categories of phraseological units including idioms, collocations, phrasal verbs, and fixed phrases.

- **Phase 1 – Introduction and Contextualization:** Students were introduced to phraseological units through texts, videos, and real-life dialogues. Focus was placed on semantic interpretation and contextual meaning.
- **Phase 2 – Guided Practice:** Learners engaged in structured activities such as matching exercises, gap-fills, and guided dialogues aimed at reinforcing recognition and controlled production of target expressions.
- **Phase 3 – Communicative Tasks:** Phraseological units were integrated into tasks requiring spontaneous communication, such as debates, role-plays, storytelling, and problem-solving discussions. Emphasis was placed on fluency, coherence, and natural usage.
- **Phase 4 – Evaluation and Reflection:** Learners completed post-instruction assessments and participated in reflection sessions, providing feedback on their experience and perceived improvement.

Throughout the process, students' performance was monitored and documented, and their progress was measured by comparing results from the initial and final assessments.

III. Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were final-year students enrolled in the English Language Teaching program at Nakhchivan State University. The group consisted of 30 students, aged between 21 and 23, all of whom had reached at least a B2 level of English proficiency, as confirmed by internal departmental assessments. These students had completed the required coursework in linguistics and methodology and were considered linguistically prepared to engage with advanced phraseological instruction.

Setting

The research was carried out in a classroom setting at Nakhchivan State University during the spring term of the 2025 academic year. Classes were held in a dedicated language lab equipped with audio-visual resources, allowing the integration of multimedia materials for teaching phraseological units. The setting provided a real academic environment conducive to communicative practice and observation.

Instruments

A variety of instruments were employed to collect data on the learners' development in phraseological competence and communicative fluency:

- **Pre- and Post-Tests on Phraseological Competence:** These written tests included gap-fill tasks, multiple-choice items, and short contextual use exercises targeting idioms, collocations, and phrasal verbs. The aim was to measure both receptive and productive phraseological knowledge before and after instruction.
- **Oral Interviews and Presentations:** Students participated in structured interviews and gave short presentations on familiar topics. These sessions were recorded and later analyzed to assess the frequency, accuracy, and naturalness of phraseological unit usage in spontaneous speech.
- **Written Tasks:** Learners were assigned weekly essays, reflective journals, and opinion papers with the requirement of using a specified set of phraseological expressions. These texts were evaluated for accuracy, contextual appropriateness, and variety of expression.
- **Observation Checklist:** During class activities, the instructor employed a checklist to record spontaneous use of target phraseological units in discussions, group work, and informal exchanges. The checklist included indicators such as correct usage, fluency, and risk-taking in language use.

Procedures

The research was conducted over a period of six to eight weeks, structured into three instructional phases:

- **Phase 1 – Introduction and Explicit Teaching:** Phraseological units were introduced in thematic clusters. Lessons included explanation of meaning, etymology where relevant, contextual examples, and common usage patterns. Students practiced identifying units in texts and dialogues.
- **Phase 2 – Controlled Practice and Integration:** Learners engaged in controlled activities, including sentence completion, substitution drills, and matching tasks. Gradually, these were replaced by more open-ended tasks such as guided conversations, opinion sharing, and pair work that required active use of the taught expressions.
- **Phase 3 – Communicative Production and Monitoring:** Students took part in communicative tasks such as debates, storytelling sessions, problem-solving activities, and simulated real-life scenarios (e.g., job interviews, travel situations). Phraseological usage was encouraged, observed, and reinforced. Improvement was monitored through ongoing assessment and feedback.

The triangulation of data collection methods enabled a comprehensive evaluation of the role phraseological units played in enhancing students' communicative fluency, with attention to both progress and persistent challenges.

IV. Results and Findings

The analysis of data collected through the pre- and post-tests, oral tasks, written assignments, and classroom observations revealed clear evidence of progress in the students' phraseological competence and communicative fluency over the six-to-eight-week instructional period.

1. Improvement in Phraseological Competence

The comparison between pre- and post-test results demonstrated a marked improvement in the students' ability to recognize and use phraseological units accurately. On average, students scored **48%** on the pre-test and **78%** on the post-test. The greatest improvement was observed in the accurate use of idiomatic expressions and collocations in context, especially in written production tasks.

2. Enhanced Communicative Fluency

Oral interviews and recorded presentations showed an increase in spontaneous use of phraseological expressions. Students were able to employ a wider range of idioms and phrasal verbs during storytelling, discussions, and debates. Their speech became more fluid and expressive, with fewer pauses and hesitation markers.

For example, during the final storytelling task, **83% of students** used at least three appropriate phraseological units naturally, compared to only **27%** in the initial tasks. This suggests that exposure and guided practice led to greater lexical access and confidence in expression.

3. Written Expression and Stylistic Variety

Analysis of written assignments revealed that students became more creative and expressive over time. Essays written in the latter half of the project contained more idiomatic phrases, cohesive devices, and formulaic language that reflected a natural command of English.

One student wrote in her final essay: "*When I finally made up my mind, I knew I had to face the music.*"—a clear indication of her ability to use metaphorical language appropriately.

4. Observation Notes: Classroom Behavior and Participation

Observational checklists highlighted greater participation in class discussions, increased peer-to-peer interaction, and willingness to experiment with language. Students were observed attempting to incorporate new phraseological units even when not prompted, indicating increased linguistic risk-taking and motivation.

The expressions most frequently used spontaneously in discussions included:

- **“Break the ice”**
- **“Once in a blue moon”**
- **“Get to the point”**
- **“Keep an eye on”**

5. Student Feedback

In end-of-course reflection forms, **90% of students** reported that phraseological units helped them sound more “natural,” “confident,” and “like a native speaker.” Many expressed a desire for more phraseology-based activities in their future courses.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the positive impact of phraseological instruction on the communicative fluency of senior university students. As evidenced by improved test scores, richer oral output, and more expressive writing, students who engaged with phraseological units over a sustained instructional period demonstrated a heightened ability to express themselves naturally, idiomatically, and with greater confidence.

Phraseological Competence as a Bridge to Fluency

The progression from literal to figurative language use marks a critical developmental stage in second language acquisition. Learners who become comfortable with idioms, phrasal verbs, and collocations tend to engage in conversations more fluidly, as their lexical choices mirror real-world language use. These findings align with Zhang (2023) and Chernov et al. (2020), who argue that phraseological competence enhances pragmatic appropriateness and reduces reliance on mechanical, textbook-like speech.

Moreover, the frequent use of specific idioms and phrasal expressions in student output suggests that such language, when contextualized and reinforced through communicative tasks, becomes internalized. Students’ confidence to “experiment” with language was especially significant; risk-taking, as noted in Pashayeva (2025), is often linked to higher fluency outcomes and long-term retention.

Pedagogical Reflections

The instructional sequence—beginning with explicit teaching and ending in free communication—proved effective in both awareness-raising and practical application. Activities like debates, storytelling, and interviews provided meaningful contexts in which students could activate the newly learned phraseological units. This echoes Mehdi (2024), who emphasized the effectiveness of contextual and task-based instruction in idiom acquisition.

Additionally, the use of an observation checklist during spontaneous activities proved useful in capturing authentic phraseological usage. While post-tests demonstrated gains in controlled understanding, it was the observational and oral data that revealed the depth of students’ internalization.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite overall progress, some challenges were noted. A few students overused or misapplied idiomatic expressions, suggesting the need for more nuanced instruction that includes stylistic awareness and register sensitivity. Furthermore, culturally bound expressions, such as “*spill the beans*” or “*under the weather*,” were initially difficult for students to grasp without visual or situational context. This supports the argument made by Aliyeva (2024) that cultural grounding is essential when teaching figurative language.

Another concern lies in the varying pace at which students develop phraseological competence. As Pashayeva (2025) highlights, individual learner differences must be accounted for, and instruction should remain flexible and differentiated where possible.

VI. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of phraseological units in enhancing communicative fluency among final-year university students. The findings clearly indicate that systematic instruction in phraseological units—integrated with communicative classroom activities—significantly improves both spoken and written fluency. Students who engaged in regular exposure, guided practice, and real-life communicative tasks became more confident, expressive, and idiomatically accurate in their language use.

Phraseological competence proved to be more than just an aesthetic linguistic feature—it served as a catalyst for smoother, more natural communication. As learners became more comfortable using idioms, phrasal verbs, and collocations, their language shifted from structurally correct but flat output to dynamic, contextually rich expression. This transformation reflects the deep interconnection between lexical fluency and phraseology, as previously noted in the works of Chernov et al. (2020), Zhang (2023), and Minoo (2019).

Moreover, the students' feedback suggests a strong appreciation for phraseological instruction and a desire for its inclusion in broader curricular planning. Despite minor challenges related to overuse and cultural unfamiliarity, students were willing to take risks, try new expressions, and incorporate learned items into both academic and informal discourse.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this research, the following pedagogical recommendations are proposed:

1. **Integrate Phraseological Units into Core Curriculum:** Rather than treating phraseology as an optional or supplementary topic, it should be embedded into regular language instruction at advanced levels.
2. **Use Communicative, Contextualized Tasks:** Activities such as role-plays, debates, interviews, and storytelling should be emphasized to encourage natural use of phraseological expressions.
3. **Highlight Cultural Context:** Since many phraseological units are culturally loaded, their instruction should include background stories, visuals, or real-life analogies to promote deeper understanding.
4. **Offer Differentiated Instruction:** Teachers should accommodate individual learner differences by providing varied input types and scaffolding where needed.
5. **Encourage Reflective Practice:** Students should be invited to reflect on their own use of phraseological expressions in speech and writing, enhancing their metalinguistic awareness.

In conclusion, this study affirms that phraseological units are not merely decorative but are vital components of communicative fluency. Their inclusion in university-level English teaching not only enriches linguistic ability but also fosters authentic interaction and greater learner confidence.

References

- Ahmadova, A. (2025). The Ethics of Translation: An Analytical Study of Accuracy, Cultural Sensitivity, and Technological Impact. *Global Spectrum of Research and Humanities*, 2(1), 4-11. <https://doi.org/10.69760/gsrh.01012025001>
- Aliyeva, A. (2024). Phraseological Units with Color Components in the French Language: A Semantic and Cultural Analysis. *Global Spectrum of Research and Humanities*, 1(2), 14-25. <https://doi.org/10.69760/gsrh.01022024002>
- Askarkyzy, P. A., & Nurgalikyzy, T. A. (2024). THE USE OF EDUTAINMENT TECHNOLOGY IN TEACHING PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS. *ТӘШЕҢЕВ ХАБАРШЫСЫ*, 59.
- Bagirzada Vuqar, S. (2025). Developing Critical Thinking in Language Teaching. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis Et Linguarum*, 2(1), 250-253. <https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.02500132>
- Cherno, N. V., Zyryano, S. A., & Vukolo, E. A. (2020). Investigar el efecto de la formación de competencia comunicativa y pragmática en fraseología en la educación de estudiantes filológicos extranjeros. *Propósitos y Representaciones*, 8(2).
- Cherno, N. V., Zyryano, S. A., & Vukolo, E. A. (2020). Investigating the Effect of Formation of Communicative and Pragmatic Competence in Phraseology in Educating Foreign Philological Students. *Propósitos y Representaciones*, 8(2).
- Dinevich, I. A., Ivanova, A. S., & Kulikova, E. (2023). Specifics of teaching Russian language phraseology to foreign students (based on the phraseological units with verbs of motion). *Revista Amazonia Investiga*, 12(68), 269-280.
- Mehdi, S. (2024). Techniques Used in Teaching Idioms. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis Et Linguarum*, 1(2), 34-42. <https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.01024063>
- Minoo, K. (2019). On the role of phraseological units in teaching english as a foreign language to adult learners. *Armenian Folia Anglistika*, 15(2 (20)), 56-63.
- Naghiyeva, G. (2025). Revamping Traditional Methods: Evaluating the Grammar-Translation Method in Modern Language Teaching. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis Et Linguarum*, 2(1), 88-97. <https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.02500111>
- Pashayeva, S. (2025). Individual Differences in Students' Learning Potential. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis Et Linguarum*, 2(1), 242-249. <https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.02500131>
- Zhang, Y. (2023). On the Phraseology of Chinese College Student Oral English in Public Speaking. *Journal of Linguistics and Communication Studies*, 2(4), 14-27.

Received: 22.03.2025

Revised: 23.03.2025

Accepted: 25.03.2025

Published: 31.03.2025