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Using Idioms in English Academic Writing: University Lecturers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study explores university lecturers' perceptions and evaluations of the use of idioms in English academic writing. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 English lecturers, each of whom had at least three years of experience teaching academic writing courses. The findings indicate that lecturers do not regard idioms as inherently inappropriate in academic writing; rather, idioms are viewed as a conditional discourse resource that may be acceptable when they serve clear argumentative or organizational functions and conform to academic style. The participants emphasized the importance of distinguishing between academically appropriate idioms and colloquial expressions, and identified several challenges faced by EFL students, particularly stylistic mismatch and semantic misuse. The study highlights the central role of lecturers in guiding students' awareness of idioms and in establishing academic writing norms. The findings contribute a pedagogical perspective to existing research on idioms in academic discourse.

Keywords: Idioms, Academic Writing, University Lecturers, Discourse Style

1. Introduction

Academic writing in English plays a crucial role in higher education, not only as a means of presenting knowledge but also as a way for writers to participate in the academic discourse community. Traditionally, academic writing is associated with an objective, precise style of expression and minimizes the use of figurative language. As a result, idioms are often considered inappropriate or to be avoided in academic texts. However, many recent linguistic studies show that idioms and metaphorical expressions are not entirely absent from academic discourse; on the contrary, they still appear with important functions such as expressing abstract concepts, organizing arguments, creating coherence, and expressing the academic voice of the writer (Miller, 2020; Simpson & Mendis, 2003) ^[26]. From this perspective, Lazar (2003) argues that idioms should be considered a part of metaphorical language, which can contribute to making academic expression more lively and accessible when used appropriately and in the right context.

For learners of English as a second or foreign language, the issue of idiom usage in academic writing becomes even more complex. Danilina's (2025) ^[6] research indicates that EFL students still use idioms in their academic writing, even with considerable frequency, but this use is not always accompanied by a full understanding of stylistic appropriateness. Despite this, most current research focuses on analyzing learners' written output or corpus data, while the perceptions, attitudes, and perspectives of faculty members – those directly guiding students' academic writing standards – remain largely underexplored / have not been systematically examined. This gap highlights the need for research that approaches the issue of idioms in academic writing from the perspective of university faculty. Based on these reasons, this paper aims to answer the following research question: How do university lecturers perceive and evaluate the use of idioms in English academic writing?

2. Literature review

2.1. Vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies

Over the past few decades, scholars have consistently emphasized that language is not only a means of communication but also a decisive factor in shaping human interactions and intellectual development. Within this context, English has become the global common language, essential for oral and written communication in education, science, business, and technology (Crystal, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2011). For countries where English is used as a foreign language, such as Vietnam, proficiency in written English is particularly important because academic success, the dissemination of research, and employment prospects depend heavily on the ability to produce accurate, fluent, and eloquent written texts.

Vocabulary has long been considered the foundation of language proficiency. Lewis (1993), a pioneer in the vocabulary approach, argued that vocabulary, not grammar, is central to English language teaching, as words and their combinations form the crucial raw material of communication. Writing lacking appropriate vocabulary and richness of expression will inevitably be limited in clarity and persuasiveness. Currently, vocabulary teaching in many contexts still separates words from their natural combination environment, preventing learners from using them flexibly, especially in academic discourse (Schmitt, 2010; Nation, 2013).

Jenkins and Dixon (1983) ^[12] argued that vocabulary acquisition is a continuous process that learners should prioritize in language development. These authors pointed out that vocabulary is essential in all language teaching methods, as learners must continuously acquire new vocabulary while mastering grammatical structures and practicing the phonetic system. This emphasizes the fundamental role of vocabulary in mastering English as a second or foreign language. Vocabulary refers to the set of words governed by specific combination rules that make up a language. According to Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), these words are known and actively used by individuals in specific fields. Clenton and Booth (2021) further emphasize the importance of vocabulary in second language learning, supporting the view that it is a crucial determinant of communicative competence. These authors also emphasize the vocabulary knowledge necessary for pre-intermediate level speaking tasks, arguing that this knowledge develops along with the learner's proficiency.

Although vocabulary knowledge is often understood in terms of single words, idioms and formulaic sequences clearly belong to the broader category of multi-word lexical units. Unlike individual lexical items, these pre-constructed strings of words function as conventionalized chunks that are stored and retrieved holistically (Wray, 2002). This implies that traditional vocabulary-learning strategies, such as memorizing word lists or studying individual word meanings, may be insufficient to equip learners with the formulaic competence needed for academic writing. Instead, learners require specific strategies to acquire and practice multi-word units, including identifying formulaic sequences in authentic texts, using concordance tools, and engaging in contextualized production tasks (Schmitt, 1997) ^[28]. By developing strategies tailored for formulaic language learning, learners can expand their repertoire of idioms and formulaic sequences, thereby improving coherence, fluency, and rhetorical effectiveness in academic essays.

2.2. Challenges for Learners of English as a Second Language in Academic Essay Writing

Linguistic Challenges

One of the most persistent challenges for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners is limited linguistic resources. As Shokrpour and Fallahzadeh (2007) ^[27] pointed out, writing in a foreign language is a complex activity that reflects both communicative and linguistic competence, making the learning process more difficult for those who lack a rich vocabulary and syntactic flexibility. According to Hinkel (2003), many EFL students struggle to produce grammatically accurate structures, which undermines the clarity and persuasiveness of their arguments.

Organizational and Coherence Issues

Beyond grammar and vocabulary, learners often struggle to organize ideas coherently. Zamel (1983) ^[31] emphasizes that EFL students often view writing as a product rather than a process, leading to poorly structured essays and weak transitions. Similarly, Nenotek et al. (2022) ^[20] observed that students often struggle to develop their thesis statements and maintain logical connections between paragraphs, resulting in fragmented, disjointed arguments.

Limited Use of Academic Vocabulary and Formulaic Competence

EFL learners also experience difficulties in utilizing discipline-specific vocabulary and formulaic sequences. Chen and Baker (2010) ^[2] found that non-native writers tend to overuse a small set of standard cohesive devices (e.g., *on the contrary*, *in conclusion*) while neglecting more complex phrases that characterize academic discourse. Nation (2013) emphasizes that inadequate exposure to formulaic sequences and academic collocations can hinder students' ability to write fluently and persuasively.

Cultural and Rhetorical Differences

Cultural backgrounds can also influence writing difficulties. Kaplan's (1966) ^[13] theory of contrastive rhetoric explains that students from different linguistic backgrounds may transfer rhetorical patterns from their native languages into their English essays, thereby leading to digressions or indirectness that do not align with Anglo-American academic conventions. Building on this perspective, Connor (1996) further demonstrates that cultural expectations regarding argumentation strongly influence students' English writing performance.

Affective and Motivational Barriers

Finally, affective factors such as anxiety, low self-confidence, and a lack of motivation also constitute significant obstacles. Horwitz et al. (1986) ^[8] argue that writing anxiety is particularly severe in second language learning contexts, where learners often fear negative evaluation. Nasser (2015) ^[18] adds that without sufficient motivation and support, learners may perceive writing as a burdensome task, which can diminish their willingness to practice and improve.

Academic essay writing is not merely a matter of grammatical accuracy and logical structure, but also a profound manifestation of linguistic competence. Recent research in applied linguistics has demonstrated that the production of effective academic texts relies heavily on writers' ability to use conventionalized multi-word

expressions that reflect coherence, stance, and disciplinary identity (Hyland, 2008; Wray, 2002) ^[11]. Within this framework, formulaic sequences emerge as essential building blocks that, when used appropriately, enrich academic discourse with evaluative and stylistic depth.

2.3. Idioms and Metaphorical Language in Academic Discourse

Idioms are commonly viewed as fixed linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be directly deduced from the literal meanings of their components. According to Lazar (2003), idioms are a subtype of metaphorical language that reflects how humans conceptualize experiences and thoughts through linguistic imagery. Baker (2018) discusses idioms and fixed expressions as important multi-word units that pose challenges for interpretation and translation. On a broader scale, Cognitive Metaphor Theory posits that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a fundamental mechanism of human thought, particularly in the expression of abstract concepts (Lakoff, 1993) ^[14]. In academic discourse, metaphors and idiomatic expressions clarify arguments, organize ideas, and project the writer's academic voice. Hyland (2004) ^[11] points out that metaphorical language occurs with significant density in academic texts, demonstrating that idioms do not solely belong to spoken language but are also a natural constituent of academic language.

Corpus-based studies have provided compelling evidence that idioms are not absent from English academic discourse. Through the analysis of academic corpora, Simpson and Mendis (2003) ^[26] noted that idioms appear with considerable frequency in spoken academic discourse and often serve discourse functions such as clarifying meaning, establishing textual cohesion, and supporting argumentative organization. Expanding to both spoken and written academic discourse, Miller (2020) ^[17] asserts that idioms are indeed used in academic texts, albeit at a lower frequency than in everyday communication. These idioms are typically stylistically neutral and are associated with argumentative functions rather than emotional expression. However, because idioms are often seen as a hallmark of spoken language, many writers, particularly learners, tend to avoid them in academic writing. According to Miller (2020) ^[17], this avoidance may reflect a limitation in formulaic competence, making it difficult for writers to fully access the conventions of the academic discourse community.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the use of idioms in academic writing poses numerous challenges for learners. Studies indicate that these difficulties primarily stem from the semantic opacity and the degree of fixity of idioms, which make it challenging for learners to infer meanings and apply them accurately within academic contexts (Szudarski, 2017; Peters, 2016) ^[29, 21]. Furthermore, learners face the risk of stylistic incongruity when expressions common in daily communication are used inappropriately in academic texts. Shin (2019) ^[25] points out that non-native writers tend to rely more heavily on conversational linguistic sequences than native writers do in academic essays. Research findings by Danilina (2025) ^[6] also reveal that while university students still utilize idioms in their academic writing, such usage often lacks stylistic sensitivity, leading to a mixture of neutral idioms and those with informal nuances.

In higher education, instructors play a pivotal role in

establishing and communicating the norms of academic writing, including guidance on the use of formulaic language, such as idioms. Through instruction, feedback, and writing assessment, instructors help shape students' perceptions of stylistic appropriateness and academic discourse conventions. Miller (2020) ^[17] suggests that the active avoidance of idioms in academic writing may reflect a limitation in formulaic competence, while also highlighting the need for explicit guidance from instructors regarding idioms that align with academic style. From the learner's perspective, Danilina's (2025) ^[6] research also emphasizes the importance of instructors raising students' awareness of the functions and stylistic nature of idioms in academic writing. However, the majority of current studies still focus on learners' written products or corpus data, while instructors' perspectives and perceptions on the use of idioms in academic writing remain underexplored. This gap underscores the necessity for research that approaches the issue from the viewpoint of university instructors.

2.4. Previous Studies and Orientation of Current Research

Previous studies on idioms in academic discourse have primarily focused on three main directions. First, theoretical and corpus-based research has established that idioms and metaphorical language are natural components of academic discourse, fulfilling various functions such as organizing arguments, clarifying abstract meanings, and projecting the writer's academic voice (Simpson & Mendis, 2003; Miller, 2020) ^[26]. Second, studies in English language learning indicate that learners encounter numerous difficulties when using idioms in academic writing, particularly regarding stylistic appropriateness and formulaic competence (Shin, 2019; Szudarski, 2017) ^[25, 29]. Third, research by Danilina (2025) ^[6] provides empirical evidence that university students continue to use idioms in their academic writing, though they often lack sensitivity to discourse style. However, the majority of existing research focuses on analyzing learners' written products or corpus data, while instructors' perspectives and perceptions on the use of idioms in academic writing remain underexplored. This paper aims to explore university instructors' perceptions and evaluations of the use of idioms in English academic writing.

3. Research Methodology

The current study employs a qualitative research design to explore university instructors' perceptions and evaluations of the use of idioms in English academic writing. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their perspectives and teaching experiences in depth and flexibly. The participants consisted of 12 English instructors currently working at a university, selected through purposive sampling. All participating instructors had at least three years of experience teaching undergraduate academic writing modules. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, each lasting 30-45 minutes, and were recorded with participants' consent. The interview data were subsequently fully transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning related to the instructors' perceptions, attitudes, and pedagogical practices.

4. Findings and Discussion

Data analysis from the interviews with 12 university

instructors reveals that their perceptions and evaluations concerning the use of idioms in English academic writing revolve around four primary themes: (1) idioms as conditional discourse resources in academic writing; (2) the distinction between academic and colloquial idioms; (3) the challenges and risks associated with EFL students' usage of idioms; and (4) the central role of instructors in guiding and normalizing the use of idioms within academic writing.

4.1. Idioms as Conditional Discourse Resources in Academic Writing

A prominent finding is that most instructors do not consider idioms entirely inappropriate for academic writing. Instead, idioms are viewed as conditional discourse resources that should be used only when they clearly serve argumentative purposes and textual organization. Many instructors emphasized that idioms in academic writing are not intended to evoke emotion or "embellish" the prose, but primarily fulfill functions such as transitioning ideas, emphasizing perspectives, or establishing analytical frameworks. One instructor shared: "Idioms in academic writing, if present, are not meant to make the sentences flowery, but to help the argument flow smoothly and sound academic." This perspective aligns with Miller's (2020) [17] argument that idioms in academic discourse are typically stylistically neutral and serve argumentative rather than emotional functions.

However, the instructors also expressed strong caution. Many suggested that idioms should be used only when the writer has achieved strong control over academic style and a deep understanding of the semantic nuances of each expression. A representative opinion stated: "Idioms are not mandatory. If removing them leaves the meaning clear, I usually advise students to opt for more explicit expressions." This reflects the prevailing notion that clarity and precision remain the top priorities in academic writing, and that idioms play a supplementary role only when they do not compromise these criteria.

4.2. Differentiating Academic and Colloquial Idioms: Perceptions of Style and Register

The second theme clearly demonstrates the instructors' stylistic sensitivity. All participants emphasized the need to distinguish between idioms suitable for academic prose and those that are colloquial. The criteria used by instructors to differentiate these include the level of formality, discourse function, and the possibility of replacement with explicit expressions. One instructor explained: "I look at the function of the idiom. If it helps transition ideas or set an argumentative framework, it is acceptable; if it sounds like everyday conversation, I reject it." Another instructor noted: "The issue is not whether it is an idiom or not, but whether it makes the writing sound more like a blog post than an academic essay."

These insights reinforce the perspective, as found in previous studies, that idioms in academic discourse exist in selective, highly functional forms (Simpson & Mendis, 2003; Miller, 2020) [26, 17]. Simultaneously, the results show that instructors possess a relatively clear awareness of stylistic boundaries, something many students often lack. This explains why instructors typically adopt a "conditional acceptance" approach rather than broadly encouraging the use of idioms in academic writing.

4.3. Challenges and Risks in EFL Students' Use of Idioms

Another prominent theme is that instructors clearly identify the difficulties students encounter when using idioms in academic writing. These challenges were described consistently and can be categorized into three main groups: stylistic incongruity, semantic inaccuracy, and deviations in the degree of phraseological fixity. One instructor remarked, "Students either avoid idioms entirely or overuse them. When they do use them, they often choose ones that are far too colloquial." Another opinion emphasized: "Many students interpret idioms literally, word-for-word, so when placed in an academic sentence, it sounds very out of place."

These findings align with learner-focused research showing that idioms are among the most difficult components due to their semantic opacity and high degree of fixity (Szudarski, 2017; Peters, 2016) [29, 21]. Notably, instructors also suggested that students' avoidance of idioms is not necessarily negative; rather, it sometimes reflects a "safety strategy" to mitigate stylistic risks. However, this strategy can result in writing that lacks naturalness and falls short of the academic discourse standards expected by the international academic community. This recalls Miller's (2020) [17] concept of formulaic competence, in which the ability to use appropriate fixed expressions is a vital part of academic writing proficiency.

4.4. The Roles of Instructors in Guiding and Normalizing the Use of Idioms

The final theme emphasizes the central role of instructors in orienting the standards for using idioms in academic writing. Most instructors reported that they do not teach idioms as an independent component but integrate them into academic reading and writing activities. One instructor shared: "*I don't teach idioms through lists. I have students identify them in journal articles and then analyze their functions.*" Another stated: "*When providing feedback, I don't forbid idioms; however, if I detect a stylistic risk, I require them to rewrite the sentence more explicitly.*"

These practices demonstrate that instructors act as "gatekeepers" of academic standards, helping students avoid stylistic deviations while simultaneously opening access to more natural academic language. Nevertheless, instructors also admitted that current guidance on idioms remains individualized and unsystematic. One participant remarked: "*We all tell students to write academically, but what constitutes an appropriate idiom has not been clearly taught.*" This finding highlights the research gap identified in the literature review and reinforces the argument for more research and pedagogical guidelines focused on idioms from the instructors' perspective (Danilina, 2025) [6].

The synthesis of these themes shows that instructors' perceptions of idioms in academic writing are balanced and pragmatic. Instructors do not deny the existence of idioms in academic discourse but emphasize their conditionality, functionality, and stylistic appropriateness. This viewpoint is consistent with previous corpus studies and provides the missing pedagogical perspective in research that primarily focuses on learners' written products. The findings also suggest that teaching idioms in academic writing should be situated within the framework of developing discourse competence and stylistic awareness, rather than merely expanding vocabulary. Consequently, this study contributes to clarifying the role of instructors in bridging academic standards and teaching practices, while opening the way for

a more balanced approach to idioms in English academic writing at the university level.

The findings suggest that idioms should not be taught as isolated vocabulary items or as expressions reserved only for informal communication. Instead, academic writing instruction should help students distinguish between idioms that are stylistically neutral and functionally useful in academic prose and those that are colloquial, emotionally loaded, or inappropriate for formal writing. Lecturers may guide students to identify idiomatic and formulaic expressions in authentic academic texts, analyze their discourse functions, and compare them with clearer non-idiomatic alternatives. Such activities can help students develop stylistic awareness rather than simply memorize idiom lists.

In addition, academic writing courses should include explicit guidance on the risks of idiom use, particularly semantic opacity, phraseological fixity, and register mismatch. Feedback on student writing should therefore address not only whether an idiom is grammatically correct but also whether it contributes to clarity, precision, and argumentative coherence. At the institutional level, writing programs may benefit from shared guidelines or teaching materials that classify commonly used academic idioms and formulaic expressions according to their functions, levels of formality, and suitability for different academic writing tasks. This would make instruction less dependent on individual lecturers' intuition and more systematic across writing courses.

5. Conclusion

The current study explores the perceptions and evaluations of university faculty regarding the use of idioms in English academic writing, through semi-structured interview data with 12 faculty members experienced in teaching academic writing. The research results show that faculty members do not view idioms as entirely unsuitable for academic writing, but rather as a conditioned discourse resource that should only be used when clearly serving the purpose of argumentation, organizing ideas, and ensuring stylistic appropriateness. Faculty members emphasized the need to distinguish between academic idioms and colloquial idioms, and expressed caution regarding the risk of stylistic and semantic inaccuracies when students use idioms in academic writing. The practical significance of this study underscores the urgent need to integrate idioms and fixed phrases into academic writing curricula instead of treating them as separate elements in speaking or vocabulary lessons during language learning. The lecturers' accounts also suggest that students often struggle with idiom use, particularly through avoidance, overuse, semantic misunderstanding, and the inappropriate transfer of colloquial expressions into academic prose. In this context, instructors play a central role in guiding, standardizing, and raising students' awareness of using idioms appropriately within academic discourse norms. However, the teaching of idioms in current academic writing courses remains largely individualized and lacks a systematic approach. Although the study is limited in sample size and scope within a single educational institution, its findings contribute to supplementing a missing pedagogical perspective in research on idioms in academic writing. Within this contribution, the study opens up a more balanced approach to idiom use, emphasizing the role of instructors in developing discourse skills and stylistic awareness in

students in higher education.

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