

# Learning idiomatic expressions process through code-switching in multilingual community

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## Abstract

The Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the most linguistically countries in the world, with over than 200 languages spoken in the country. Among these different languages, two are international to mean French and English and four are national to mean Kikongo, Tshiluba, Lingala, and Kiswahili.

However, all these languages are spoken fluently except English which is spoken rarely and hardly while it is learnt at school like other disciplines since first form till fourth form. It is learnt five times per week but learners continue to experience enormous difficulties after four years learning English at secondary school. It seems that the root of different difficulties may due to different causes. Among them we can mention the materials that are not learnt such as idiomatic expressions.

The purpose of this study is not only to provide the learners difficulties but also to reveal some strategies to be used while facing with idiomatic matters in multilingual communities.

**Key words:** *Multilingualism, Language acquisition, Language learning, Idiomatic expressions, Code-switching.*

## Résumé

La République Démocratique du Congo est l'un des pays ayant beaucoup de langues dans le monde : plus de 200 langues parlées dans le pays. Parmi ces différentes langues deux sont internationales, à savoir le français et l'anglais, et quatre autres sont nationales : Kikongo, Tshiluba, Lingala et Kiswahili.

Cependant, toutes ces langues sont couramment parlées, à l'exception de l'anglais qui est d'usage circonstancié et, pourtant, il est appris à l'école comme d'autres disciplines depuis la première jusqu'en quatrième secondaire. Il est appris cinq fois par semaine, mais les apprenants continuent à présenter d'énormes difficultés après ces quatre ans de son apprentissage à l'école secondaire. Il paraît que l'origine de ces différentes

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difficultés proviendrait de plusieurs causes. Parmi elles, nous pouvons mentionner les matières qui ne sont pas apprises comme les expressions idiomatiques.

L'objectif de ce travail est non seulement de prélever les difficultés que connaissent les apprenants, mais aussi de révéler quelques stratégies à utiliser quand on se heurte à des difficultés idiomatiques dans une communauté multilinguistique.

**Mots clés :** *Multilinguisme, Acquisition linguistique, Apprentissage linguistique, Expressions idiomatiques, Commutation des codes.*

## **I. Introduction:**

In the national curriculum, English course is scheduled for being taught since first until fourth forms secondary school. As it is a language which can facilitate a finalist from secondary school to interact fluently with anyone who uses this language, the materials to be learnt should not be limited. So, learners are required to learn idioms in order to enhance their communicative competence.

Idioms are expressions that are used in the everyday natives' communication. Learning idioms will facilitate the users of English language to communicate fluently with everyone who uses idiomatic expressions. Moreover, we may know that idioms reflect cultural and historical context of a language. They make the communication effective. They convey emotions, express ideas concisely, and create a strong impact on listeners. They increase the vocabulary and improve the communicative skill.

In fact, learning idioms can help someone speak English fluently and understand the language better. It can help a learner to sound like a native English speaker. It can create meaningful connections with other English speakers.

In this study, I am going to provide the significance of idiomatic expressions, some essential idiomatic expressions, presentation and analysis of data, then release some approaches to be used while learning idiomatic expressions in order to improve learners communicative competence in a multilingual community.

### 1.1. Significance of idiomatic expressions

According to Renata D. (2022), in his article, he assessed that, a language is a form of culture from where the language originates. In human life language and culture seem inseparable, especially in the world of linguistic education on how the language is formed from the existing cultures used by the native speakers. According to Bennett J. et al. (2003), someone who learns a language without learning the culture of that language, risk becoming fluent fools. One of cultures of the language is idioms. Idioms are the construction of words or expressions whose meaning cannot be interpreted literally. Understanding idioms is an essential part of learning and using a language because it is a big part of one's culture. Understanding and using idioms correctly can facilitate the process of communication using English language in a multilingual community.

An idiom called also idiomatic expression is an expression, word, or phrase that has a figurative meaning conventionally understood by native speakers. This meaning is different from literal meaning of the idiom's individual elements. In other words, idioms do not mean exactly what the words say. They are used to add dynamism and character to otherwise stale writing. You can also use idioms to express complex ideas in a simple way. Oftentimes, idioms can help express a large or abstract ideas in a way that is succinct and easy to understand.

In addition, idioms are important since they require a deeper formality of English language to comprehend what someone means in a conversation. They seem to be complicated at the beginning but are interesting in building English skills. They give you a new way of expressing yourself in the English language.

Furthermore, idioms can help persons express themselves in more creative way during conversation. They help someone to use more complex and interesting expressions. They can be quite humorous to use, and allow you to express yourself in a more genuine way, including showing off your personality and sense of humour. Example: instead of saying "you are correct" you can simply say "**you hit the nail on the head**" or instead of saying "the rebels of M23 stopped hostilities" you can say "**the rebels of M23 buried the hatchet**".

. It is helpful as well to learners because it facilitates them to acquire the target expressions in an easy way. At last it is helpful to everyone who wishes to learn idiomatic English.

## 1.2. Essential English idioms.

Dixon (1971), assessed that “the student may learn grammar and, with time, acquire an adequate vocabulary, but without a working knowledge of such expressions... his speech will remain awkward and stilted. It is assumed that an idiom is an expression which has a meaning different from the meaning of its components parts. This explains why the idioms cannot be translated literally from one language into another without some change in its meaning or connotation. They can be confusing for non-native English speakers because, if taken literally, they simply do not have sense. According to Tiffani C. (1988), idioms are originated from the words referred to: so, some of them are presented below.

### 1.2.1 Idioms referring to the natural world:

There are many idioms that refer to parts of natural world, such as weather or animals. Because these things are already common in English vocabulary, it is only natural that they end up being parts of idiomatic expressions. Some of them are:

- **Raining cats and dogs:**

When you hear some say: “**it is raining cats and dogs**” you can bet that there is a downpour of heavy, torrential rain. Do not forget your umbrella.

- **Hold your horses :**

Calm down when you hear this expression. It does not mean you literally have horses, instead it means that someone is asking you to take it slow, and reconsider before acting. This means to wait a moment, to be more careful, to be patient before acting. For example: hold your horses we have not won yet, so do not celebrating.

### 1.2.2. Idioms referring to parts of the body

The use of body parts to form idioms is also very common. Now, we will take a look at everyday English expressions that refer to body parts:

- **To have butterflies in one’s stomach**

You can use this phrase when you are excited or even in love. It may also represent a sense of fear or anguish. To get “butterflies in the stomach” is a very common expression to describe for nervous excitement.

- **Feel it in your bones**

Do you trust your intuition? Then you are “feeling it in your bones” you can use this expression for a good or bad feeling.

### 1.2.3. Idioms to talk about feelings or emotions.

Are idioms that express feelings and emotion.

- **Get cold feet**

The expression “**cold feet**” means that a person has become nervous or afraid of doing something that was already planned. Fox example: “He was planning to ask her out on a date, but got cold feet at the very last minute.”

- **Have your mind set on something**

If you say that you have “got your mind set” on something, it means that you have already decided on accomplishing it.

### 1.2.4. Idioms to talk about feelings or emotions part 2.

Although the heart is a part of the body and we could have included it in the previous category, the heart is so special that we feel it needs a category of idioms to itself. There are so many expressions referring to emotions using the heart that it is difficult to learn all of them “by heart”

- **To wear your heart on your sleeve**

If you “wear your heart on your sleeve,” you are showing your emotions and making your feelings clear.

- **Get at the heart of the matter**

This is an expression that means to reach the main point or get the point, in a meeting, if you want to go straight to the main problem you can say; “I would like to get right to the heart of the matter;”

### 1.2.5 Idioms to describe a bad mood

Life is not always easy and sometimes people find themselves in a bad mood or angry. Some expressions that express bad mood are presented below:

- **Get on your nerves.**

This happens when someone or something really irritates you. For instance, “all this noise gets on my nerves” to mean “all this noise irritates me”.

- **Get Lost.**

You might say this when a person has an upset you want him or her to go away and leave you alone. So, you say; get lost. To mean leave me alone.

### 1.2.6. Idioms to express understanding.

In English, there are several ways to say that you understand something.

- **Shed light:**

When you “shed light” on a topic, you make it clearer to understand. For example: the teacher explained again and shed light on the process. To mean “the teacher explained again and made the process clearer”.

- **Get it:**

To get it means to understand. For example: I get it you need to rest. It means: “I understand that you need to rest. If someone says: “get it?” this means: “do you understand?”

### **1.2.7. Idioms about having fun.**

In this section, we will talk about expressions that are used when you want to enjoy life or tell someone to relax. Some of them run as follows:

- **Let your hair down:**

This expression is more often used as advice to tell someone to rest or relax. For instance: “it is Saturday night, you can let your hair down.” this means “it is Saturday night you can relax”.

- **With bells on:**

Are you going to a party? Go, with bells on. To go with bells on means to go with enthusiasm, ready to have fun.

## **II. Research methodology**

After four years, a learner of English should be able to interact fluently with whoever speaker of English even the one who uses expressions such as idiomatic ones. Nevertheless, it is noticed that fourth form pupils do not interact fluently in idiomatic English. They hardly speak, listen and write English by using idiomatic expressions.

In English like in other languages a writer or a speaker expresses himself intelligibly if he hears and understands correctly what is being spoken. In addition, the pupils are trained to be the future leaders or workers in public companies such as government, journalism, teaching, etc. where to have complete knowledge is required. So, the learners need to acquire full knowledge of English as it is used by the natives or the high class.

Moreover, the pupils should be able to interact with foreign English speakers like government members, journalists, tourists, leaders of different groups, etc. It is noticed that English like other languages has phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally ; even if you know the meanings of all the words of that phrase. Many proverbs, informal phrases and common sayings offer this kind of problem. A phrase or a sentence of this type is said to be idiomatic.

In fact, the fluent interaction with foreign English speakers depends upon the manner the learner has been trained in English, including learning expressions such as the

idiomatic ones. To wind up the pupils' performance and deficiency in idiomatic expressions, I used qualitative and quantitative methods.

As far as qualitative method is concerned, I dealt with non-numeral data, I used this method in order to wind up the qualification of teachers, the quality of books used, the use of curricula or if idiomatic expressions are included in their long range documents. I went on ground and contacted some Goma secondary school teachers. I got a permission from headmasters to collect data in their schools from teachers and learners. I wished I knew if really Goma teachers taught idiomatic expressions in fourth form. I entered in a school one after another and day after another until I finished to collect data in the schools taken as sample.

After collecting data, I used to analyzed them qualitatively i.e. the data got from ground I analyzed them to see whether teachers taught idiomatic expressions or not and the way they used to teach these idioms if it is convenient or not. .

As quantitative research method is the process of collecting and analyzing numeral data, I used this method in this work understudy. In order to know Goma 4<sup>th</sup> form learners deficiency, I collected data on ground from learners. After collecting and analyzing data, I numerically distinguished the learners who learn idioms and those who do not achieve this goal. I used to reveal the number of pupils who interacted in idiomatic English and those who did not achieve this purpose. I collected and analyzed data from one school after another until I got the general statistics table of result from all schools assessed.

### **III. Collection, presentation and analysis of data.**

#### **3.1. Collection of data.**

To ensure whether pupils from Goma learn in convenient ways which facilitate learning idiomatic English, in a multilingual community, I submitted questions to some 4th form pupils from four Goma secondary schools.

#### **3.2. Questions submitted to learners:**

**1. Are you allowed to speak other languages during English lessons?**

- a) Yes, we do
- b) No, it is forbidden
- c) The teacher punishes the one who speaks another language
- d) No, answer

- 2. What are the most difficult courses do you recognize in your class**
  - a) French, b) Mathematics, c) English, d) History, e) No answer
- 3. Are you able to communicate in English with another English speaker!**
  - a) Yes, I can without any problem. b) No, I speak it a bit, c) No, English is too difficult, d) No, answer
- 4. How can you prefer to learn English in order to master it quite well!**
  - a) The teacher can mix English with other languages.
  - b) The government can drop English on the national curriculum
  - c) The teacher can teach only in English.
  - d) The teacher can teach in English and translate in French or mother tongue.
  - e) No answer.
- 5. Apart from grammar and vocabulary, do you learn some English expressions?**
  - a) The teacher taught some English expressions.
  - b) We do not know what expressions are.
  - c) We learn grammar and vocabulary mixed with expressions
  - d) We do not learn expressions
- 6. Have you heard someone speak about metaphor, proverbs, idioms, saying, etc.**
  - a) We hear only proverbs
  - b) Some people speak about idioms others metaphor
  - c) We do not hear these terms. They seem to be new for us.
  - d) We learn them in the class
  - e) No answer

### **3.3. Presentation of data.**

After collecting data from the ground I used to present them in a table which dealt with pupils' answers from different questions I asked. For each question, I showed the number of correct answers and their percentage before pointing out the different types of errors made by the pupils and the percentage for each type. The data presentation is drawn in the table below.

Sentences	Items	Pupils responses	Number of pupils who gave responses				TOTAL		Percentage	
			Angalisho	Colombe	Nengapeta	Tumaini	C	W	C	W
Are you allowed to speak other languages during English lessons?	1.	a) Yes, we do	1	2	5	3	11			
		b) No it is forbidden	7	15	0	9		31		
		c) The teacher punishes the one who speaks another language	12	13	0	7		32		
		d)No answer	5	8	3	0		16		
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11/90</b>	<b>79/90</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>87.8</b>
What are the most difficult course do you recognize in your lesson?	2.	a) French	2	0	0	3		5		
		b) Mathematics	8	20	4	6		38		
		c) English	15	18	4	9	46			
		d)History	0	0	0	0		00		
		e)No answer	0	0	0	1		1		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>46/90</b>	<b>44/90</b>	<b>51.1</b>	<b>48.9</b>		
Are you able to communicate in English with another English speaker	3.	a) Yes, I can, without any problem	3	4	3	2	12			
		b) No, I speak it a bit	5	10	3	6		24		
		c) No, English is too difficult	12	20	2	10		44		
		e)No answer	5	4	0	1		10		
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>12/90</b>	<b>78/90</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>86.7</b>
How can you prefer to learn English in order to master it quite well?	4.	a) The teacher can mix English with other languages	6	7	2	1	16			
		b) The government can drop English on the national curriculum	0	1	0	0		1		
		c) The teacher can teach only in English	5	10	3	10		28		

		d)The teacher can teach in English and translate in French	10	20	3	8	41			
		e)No answer	4	0	0	0		4		
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>57/90</b>	<b>33/90</b>	<b>63.3</b>	<b>36.6</b>
Apart from grammar and vocabulary, do you learn some English expressions?	5	a) The teacher taught some English expressions.	3	5	2	1		11		
		b) We do not know what expressions are.	7	5	2	6		20		
		c) We learn grammar and vocabulary mixed with expressions	0	2	1	3	6			
		d) We do not learn expressions	10	18	3	9		40		
		e) No answer.	5	8	0	0		13		
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>93.3</b>
Have you heard someone speak about metaphor, proverbs, idioms, sayings, etc.	6	a) We hear only proverbs	4	8	3	6		21		
		b) Some people speak about idioms others metaphors	6	9	2	2		19		
		c) We do not hear these terms. They seem to be new for us	15	18	3	10		46		
		d) We learn them in the class	0	3	0	1	4			
		d) No answer	0	0	0	0		0		
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>95.6</b>
		<b>TOTAL GENERAL</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>136/540</b>	<b>404/540</b>	<b>25.1</b>	<b>74.9</b>

The chart above shows that learners are not allowed to use another language during English lessons. Even idioms are not learned in these schools. Out of 540 responses only 136 or 25.1% gave positive answers whereas 404 or 74.9% refused the existence of another language while learning English even the existence of idiomatic expressions as well.

### 3.4. Data analysis.

After collecting data from learners, I analyzed them as follows:

**Item 1:** it was about asking learners, if they are allowed to use another language while learning English course. Only 11 out of 90 or 12,2% said yes, they are allowed but others denied. They said that it is forbidden.

**Item 2:** this item is about providing the most difficult courses recognized in their forms. The courses recognized to be the most difficult are English and mathematics. English is the first one with 46 out 90 or 51.1% whereas mathematics is the second with 38 out of 90 or 42.2% other courses had 6.7.

**Item 3:** it is about the pupils ability of interacting with other speakers of English. Only 12 out 90 said that they are able to interact with other English speakers. Other said that they are able a bit, others said that it is too difficult, even others did not say anything.

**Item 4:** this item is about asking learners their opinions about how they wish English to be taught. 57 out 90 or 63,3% said that it can be good if the teacher mixes English with other languages like French, etc.

**Item 5:** this item was about revealing whether idiomatic expressions were learnt in the class. Unfortunately, these expressions are not learnt in Goma secondary schools. Out of 90 answers only 6 were positive.

**Item 6:** from this item I wanted to know if learners have an idea about such expressions. The answers got from them show that learners do not have any idea about these expressions. Out of 90 answers only 4 agreed to have an idea about idioms.

## IV. Findings

After the analysis of the data above, I noticed that the pupils from Goma town had the great problem in idiomatic expressions. To guess the hidden meaning from the idiomatic expressions was the awful request of them. Those who succeeded some questions, it was only the chance because the questions had even answers among them, they could choose the best. Some items were similar but the pupils succeed the first and failed the second and vice versa. In general the correct answers were 136 out of 540 or 25.1%. Whereas the wrong answers were 404 out of 540 or 74.9 %.

## V. Discussion

Taking into account the pupils' performance, the result got provides that Goma secondary pupils are not performed in idioms. Out of 540 responses only 136 were correct i.e 25.1%. Others were wrong; 404 i.e. 74.9%. The percentage of correct answers was low. They succeeded some items only by chance.

**Item 4:** This is the item succeeded by learners. It was to wind up the point of view about the way English should be taught in a convenient way which can facilitate learners to master English language. The majority of learners chose to learn English language by using code-switching. Out of 90 answers, the correct ones were 57 or 63.3%. Out of 6 items, only one has been succeeded. Apart from the result related to the number of items succeeded, the case related to each school is discussed in the table below:

- Angalisho : succeeded only two items the second and the sixth
- Colombe: succeeded only the fourth item.
- Nengapeta: succeed the first item and the second
- Tumaini: this school did not succeed any question among the six questions submitted to them.

In a nutshell, leaning English as a foreign language in a multilingual community requires a fulfilment of all English materials including idiomatic expressions sustained by code-switching if the query is needed.

## VI. Pedagogical suggestions and conclusion

### 6.1. Pedagogical suggestions:

Goma is multilingual town. International, national and regional languages are spoken in this town. A pupil who finishes secondary school should speak fluently English even if the emitter uses idiomatic English. A learner from Goma who reaches this level should speak more than three languages i.e. French, English and Kiswahili. Nevertheless, it is not the case. Only French and Kiswahili are spoken fluently whereas English remains a matter to be tackled.

However, since 1<sup>st</sup> form secondary school, pupils start learning a new language, English. Unfortunately, teachers of English ignore code-switching and use only English-English while teaching English. Also some materials are not learnt such as idiomatic expressions. This approach blocks learners' skill fulfillment. Hence, to facilitate language learning, a didactics is designed below in order to enhance teaching and learning process in this Goma multilingual community. In the book written by Marianne et al. (1979:3), entitled "*Teaching English as foreign language*" you will notice that using code-switching in order to enhance learning process is permitted. However, to fulfill the goal of this article, some strategies are proposed to be used by those who wish to learn idiomatic English in multilingual community.

## 6.2. Learn idioms through context.

Idioms cannot be taken literally. They must be learnt through context. The teacher may encourage his learners to read books which contain idiomatic expressions, to watch TV, etc. He may teach texts containing idiomatic expressions in order to enhance his learners communicative competence.

## 6.3. Learn idioms by grouping them in themes:

According to Broukal (1994), idioms are classed in different groups: Some of them are expressed below:

### - Idioms from colors:

#### Examples:

Many books are bought **in black market**: this means the market not controlled by the government.

### - Idioms from numbers

#### Examples:

The burglars had **a sixth sense**, otherwise they could be caught

**Meanings** : **A sixth sense**: A special feeling for something, or a special understanding of things.

### - Idioms from parts of the body

#### Examples:

c) Tom is **pulling your leg**. Do not believe him;

#### Meanings

- **To pull someone's leg**: To joke, to trick

### - Idioms from plants

a) Women wanted their lives to be **a bed of roses**

#### Meanings:

- **A bed of roses**: Comfortable, good, easy situation

## 6.4. Use idioms in sentences to practice:

A learner of idiomatic expressions can exercise himself by writing some dialogues or stories containing idiomatic words.

## 6.5. Imitate idiomatic sounds.

Listen and repeat aloud what is spoken from the radio, TV, or another speaker who expresses himself by using idiomatic English.

**6.6. Repeat regularly idioms;**

Have a list of idioms on one hand and their meanings on the other hand. So, repeat them regularly.

**6.7. Insert idioms in your speech.**

If possibility is, it is better to use idioms in your daily English interactions.

**6.8. Subject yourself at least one idiom per day.**

Through idiomatic books, learn everyday idioms at least one idiom per day. The idioms learnt per day must be put in the notebook (agenda).

**6.9. Revise your idiomatic agenda.**

Before learning a new idiom start by revising the idiomatic expressions learnt previously.

**6.10. Guess idiomatic meaning.**

While reading an idiomatic text, release idioms from it and attempt to guess their meanings. The fact of checking will come after.

**6.11. Have a depth reading.**

The reading of books containing idiomatic expressions can enhance your level your communicative competence.

**6.12. Learn common idioms at the beginning.**

Idioms are numerous. Some of them are common but others no. So, it is better to learn common idioms at the beginning and others after.

**6.13. Highlight and compare idioms.**

Compare English idiomatic expressions across languages and culture. Compare idioms from your culture to idioms from English language.

**6.14. Use code-switching.**

Practice the language by using code-switching and idiomatic English

**6.15. Use English and the first language.**

Write down idioms in English and explanation in both English and first language

**6.16. Find equivalence.**

Find equivalent idioms in cultural language and English and release their similarities and dissimilarities.

## Conclusion

The Democratic Republic of Congo is a multilingual country with over than 200 languages. Goma as well, is multilingual town. It includes more than three languages.

In fact, a learner of English as a second and foreign language face multiple difficulties related to learning English in monolingual system. As the result, it is noticed that after four years learning English at secondary school, pupils from 4<sup>th</sup> form are not able to interact fluently in English with any speaker of a target language.

In front of this issue, I worked on this topic in order to wind up the solution related to the fact.

Before finding out some solution suggestions, I went on group with two questionnaires. One submitted to teachers, another one to learners.

After the collection and analysis of data, I remarked that the fact of using monolingual pedagogy in multilingual community is one of the root causes of failure in teaching and learning English.

Accordingly, I suggested teachers of English as second and foreign language, not only to use English, but also to intervene with code-switching if the query is needed. On the other hand, not to limit the field but to spread the horizons by introducing all materials such as idiomatic notions.

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