



Idioms across languages, and implications for ESL in Mother-tongue-based Multilingual Education contexts

James McLellan

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

james.mclellan@ubd.edu.bn

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Corresponding author

James McLellan

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

james.mclellan@ubd.edu.bn

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Department of English,
University of Santo Tomas
Manila, The Philippines

Abstract

In the heat generated by recent burning controversies over ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ (ELF) and its junior sibling ‘Asian Lingua Franca English’ (ALFE), one issue has repeatedly raised its head: that of access by second-language users of English to the idiomatic expressions which are thought to be the exclusive property of first-language or ‘inner-circle’ users.

This article draws on three textual corpora to address issues of idiomatic competence, creative and unilateral idiomaticity. The first corpus is the output of Southeast Asians who meet at regional gatherings such as those convened by ASEAN or SEAMEO, where English is the language choice for formal speeches. This is compared with a corpus of similar size but intra- rather than international, consisting of business speeches made by New Zealanders to other New Zealanders. A third corpus, written rather than spoken, comprises articles published recently in Asia-based academic journals, the *Journal of Asia TEFL* and the *EIL Journal*. The corpus analysis is complemented by data from a survey of idiom awareness within a cohort of Brunei undergraduate students, including idioms across languages.

The discussion and conclusions consider the pedagogical implications of research into idiom use and idiomaticity. In particular the paper considers the affordances of consciousness-raising by comparing English idiomatic expressions with those of Southeast Asian languages, including local vernaculars.

Keywords: Idioms, idiomaticity, idiomatic competence, Asian Lingua Franca English, Mother-tongue-based Multilingual Education

1. Introduction

This article begins by defining and exemplifying ‘idioms’, ‘idiomaticity’ and ‘idiomatic competence’. It then outlines research conducted by others and by the present author,

including a comparative corpus-based study which investigated the use and non-use of idioms in contexts of Asian Lingua Franca English compared to an intranational corpus from an L1 English “inner-circle” (Kachru, 1983) country, New Zealand, and to a corpus of academic articles from two online journals.

The second dataset discussed in the article is from a small-scale survey of Bruneian students at Brunei Darussalam’s premier university, the University of Brunei Darussalam, conducted in early 2015. This survey investigated the students’ active and passive knowledge of two categories of idioms.

The discussion section addresses pedagogical questions arising from these research findings, in particular how English language teachers might raise their students’ awareness of idioms and idomaticity across languages in a context such as the Philippines, where Mother-tongue-based Multilingual Education (henceforth MTBMLE) has become a national policy (Martin, 2015; Madrunio, 2015).

2. Background; definitions; some relevant previous studies

Idioms may be defined as ‘chunks’ or ‘multi-word units’, in which at least one component is not intended to be interpreted in its literal sense: “A linguistic form whose meaning is unclear in spite of the familiar elements it contains” (Makkai, 1972 as cited in Prodromou, 2008, p. 49). Idomaticity is defined, for the purposes of this article, as an overarching research framework, alternatively known as phraseology (Howarth, 2008), for the study of idiomatic language. One major issue in terms of idiomatic language use, as well as teaching and learning, can be seen in what was highlighted by Lacaba (1997, p. 161) with reference to the use of clichés in Philippine English:

The problem is that we don’t even get the clichés right. A lot of Filipinos, for instance, say “bark **at** the wrong tree” instead of “bark **up** the wrong tree”. Or we say “birds of **the same** feather” instead of “birds **of a** feather”. So are these Filipino expressions acceptable in Philippine English? Or should we use the standard American or British clichés? Or should we find a way of not using clichés at all? (emphasis added)

Thus ‘bark up the wrong tree’ needs to be unpacked by readers and learners as having no connection whatever with dogs or with trees, and ‘birds of a feather’ refers to the tendency for people to associate with others of like mind or similar sociocultural background rather than to any pattern of ornithological behavior. Lacaba’s comment is significant for this study, as it refers to issues of power and ownership of English idioms, suggesting that the forms generally used by first-language, ‘inner circle’ English users may undergo syntactic changes when used by second- or foreign-language users in Southeast Asia. In line with World Englishes researchers who assert the autonomy and independence of all varieties of English, Filipinos and other Southeast Asian users feel that they have every right to use these

expressions in whatever syntactic form they choose, and should not need to slavishly follow British or US norms. Variations on traditional idiomatic expressions (including clichés) can be described as “creative idiomaticity” (Prodromou, 2008, pp. 52-53).

Idioms, even those derided as ‘clichés’, are often highly culture-bound, deriving from the sociocultural context of the users (Charteris-Black, 2002; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Howarth, 1998; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 22-24; Prodromou, 2007), and the use of idioms from L1 cultures such as those of the UK and the USA may not be immediately intelligible to Southeast Asians. This is termed “unilateral idiomaticity” by Seidlhofer (2004) and Seidlhofer and Widdowson (2009). Idioms such as those in example set [1] are thus less likely to occur in international and intercultural contexts such as ASEAN meetings, where the main requirement is for clear communication, rather than fancy or expressive turns of phrase.

The following expressions, from the sports register of three ‘inner circle’ varieties of English, may serve as illustrations of unilateral idiomaticity. These expressions have all transcended the register of the particular sport from which they derive, and are used intranationally with the expectation that they will not lead to any communication breakdown.

[1]

USA (baseball)

Ballpark (figure)

Whole new ball game

Out of left field

Play hardball

UK (cricket)

Sticky wicket

(Play it with a) straight bat

New Zealand (rugby)

Hospital pass

Over the line

The fact that the USA-based baseball terms may be used and understood outside the main baseball-playing countries is testimony to the power and spread of American English. The cricket and rugby idioms from the UK and New Zealand are less likely to be intelligible in countries where these sports are not popular. According to Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000, p. 324-328), international students find difficulty understanding Australian university lecturers when the latter include local references and idioms, e.g. from the register of Australian Rules football.

The notion of ‘idiomatic competence’ is a crucial component of this discussion, especially when considering pedagogical aspects of idiom use and idiomaticity. It can be viewed as an aspect of Hymes’s (1972) concept of “communicative competence”, applicable to all four components of Canale and Swain’s (1980) subcategorisation of this into grammatical, strategic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence:

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Grammatical: | whether to say ‘bark up the wrong tree’ or ‘bark at the wrong tree’ |
| Strategic: | whether to use idioms from a particular register (e.g. sport) or not |
| Sociolinguistic: | whether the context of situation encourages or discourages frequent use of idioms |
| Discourse: | the choice of appropriate idioms which enhance coherence in a text |

In classifying idioms we can measure transparency along a continuum: the simile ‘straight as an arrow’ is more transparent hence more intelligible than ‘all mouth and trousers’, a UK idiom used to refer to people who talk a lot but have nothing of substance to say.

High frequencies of idiom use can be found in some genres and registers, such as news media reports, especially in the popular as opposed to highbrow newspapers. Sports reports include especially high percentages of idioms (Kirkpatrick & McLellan, 2011, pp. 656-657).

The specific research question investigated here, as part of wider research into the existence and nature of Asian Lingua Franca English (ALFE), is whether the figurative expressions used derive from American, British or other L1 English sociocultural contexts, whether they derive from the speakers’ national languages or from their local L1 vernacular contexts. A further possibility is that the speakers or their speechwriters consciously seek to eliminate figurative expressions in order to maintain international intelligibility. This aligns with Kirkpatrick’s (2007, pp.10-13) theory of an “identity-communication continuum”, which refers to the two major functions of language: projection of identity through use of an in-group or local language variety; and communication of ideas and opinions, requiring the use of an out-group, more formal language variety for intelligibility. If this is so, then the restricted use of idiomatic expressions may be seen as characteristic of a developing ALFE variety.

3. Comparative Study of Idiom Use in Three Corpora

This section presents and discusses findings from a comparative study based on three small corpora of speech texts. An ALFE corpus of 30 speeches delivered at SEAMEO and ASEAN gatherings was compiled. This amounted to 33,074 words. The objectives were to discover:

- the frequency of occurrence of idioms
- which figurative idiomatic expressions were used most often
- whether the context of an international gathering led to reduced use of figurative expressions.

The corpus included texts of 30 speeches made at ASEAN and SEAMEO gatherings between 2002 and 2006. Mostly these were opening or closing addresses. The corpus was searched manually in order to compile a list of figurative expressions. These were then listed in order of frequency of occurrence. In order to make a valid comparison, a reference corpus of equivalent size was collected. This also consisted of speeches made at political or business forums and gatherings, and covered the same time span, but the participants were all users of the same inner circle variety, namely New Zealand English, addressing each other. The figurative expressions were collected and analysed in the same way as the ALFE corpus. A third, somewhat larger corpus consisted of 19 academic journal articles (total: 98,000 words) in the *EIL Journal* and the *Asian EFL Journal*. It was hypothesized that the second, intranational, corpus would show the highest frequency and range of idioms, and that the third corpus would show the lowest frequency of idiom use, since rich idiomaticity is not normally characteristic of academic discourse.

Findings from ALFE Corpus

A total of 122 tokens of idiomatic expressions were found in the ALFE corpus. This represents a ratio of 1 for every 270 words throughout the corpus. The most frequently occurring lemmas and phrases are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1
Most frequent figurative expressions in ASEAN/SEAMEO speeches corpus

| Lemma | Number of Occurrences | Number of Speeches |
|--------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Seamless | 12 | 6 |
| Tap / untapped | 5 | 4 |
| Leverage(d) (verb) | 5 | 4 |
| Bottom line | 5 | 2 |
| Forge (verb) | 4 | 3 |
| Fast track | 4 | 3 |
| Harness (verb) | 3 | 3 |

Examples of these with expanded context are given in [2].

[2]
resulting in a *seamless* movement of goods
keen to *tap* the vibrancy of a region on the move
ASEAN can *leverage* on the expertise and experience
Bottom line goals of profit and growth

Forging East Asian business synergies

Its recommendations will include “*fast tracking*” the liberalization and market integration by *harnessing* the specific core competencies areas

Other figurative expressions only occur once or twice throughout the corpus, as exemplified in example set [3].

[3]

To chart *roadmaps*

up the technology *ladder*

the indispensable “*glue*” *binding* these countries

movers and shakers

open-arms welcome

reaping these dividends

ASEAN to thrive as *a hub* for Asia

ASEAN is a *concert* of Southeast Asian nations

multipronged approaches towards integration

The concordance for ‘seamless’, the most frequent idiom in this corpus, is shown in Table 2, with up to five words of context before and after.

Table 2

Concordance for ‘seamless’ in ALFE corpus

- technology, human resource and a “seamless” market should be a driving
- strong hindrances to the creation of the seamless production base, and single
- can play a pivotal role and provide a seamless link for transportation
- between countries, resulting in a seamless movement of goods from
- to provide Sun with a comprehensive, seamless global logistics solution
- logistics companies to facilitate the seamless distribution of their goods and
- the case for the seamless ASEAN market that
- up various bases into a seamless market
- positioning of the region as a seamless market and
- be best summed up in two key words, ‘seamless’ and ‘value’. The region will be
- and ‘value’, The region will be ‘seamless’ when borders between
- formalities, barriers to a seamless flow of goods

The most frequent collocate of the target word ‘seamless’ here is ‘market’, with four tokens.

There is only one occasion in the ALFE corpus where an extended section of figurative language occurs. This is in a speech at the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit, held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in December 2005. Referring to ASEAN negotiations with India and Japan, the then ASEAN Secretary-General stated “It was like a ship sailing through high winds and rough sea waves. Now, our ship is resting in quiet port, re-charging our energy and getting ready to set sail again” (Source: <http://web5.bernama.com/events/aseansummit/speech.php?id=343>). In the context of ASEAN, where all member nations except the Lao PDR have a coastline and depend in large measure on maritime trade, this extended idiom cannot be considered as culture-bound or as creating any intelligibility problem for the audience.

Findings from New Zealand Corpus

In the intranational reference corpus of New Zealand business speeches, there is a higher frequency and a wider range of figurative idiomatic expressions. In a corpus totalling 34,884 words there are 157 figurative words or expressions, giving a ratio of one to every 216 words. The reason for this higher frequency is that speakers are less constrained by the fear of being unintelligible. Their audience is from the same sociocultural background and is familiar with same variety of English, so the New Zealand speakers are able to indulge in a richer variety of figurative and creative expressions, as shown in Table 3 and in example set [4].

Table 3

Most frequent figurative expressions in New Zealand speeches corpus

| Lemma | Number of Occurrences | Number of Speeches |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Bottom line | 6 | 1 |
| The big(ger) picture | 5 | 3 |
| Doom and gloom | 2 | 2 |
| Hard-nosed | 2 | 2 |
| Over-arching | 2 | 2 |
| Canary (in the coal mine) | 4 | 3 |
| (fly-by-night) cowboys | 2 | 1 |
| Number 8 wire | 2 | 1 |

These are shown with expanded context in [4].

[4]

I've got my eye on a bigger picture (the health and safety Nirvana???)
It's not necessarily all doom and gloom
You can't fly in the face of hard-nosed economic results like that!
We do, however, also have an over-arching organisational vision
... the canary in the coal mine of the new global economic order
... from fly-by-night cowboys who really don't give a damn
I only learnt about the number 8 wire mentality on arriving here.

The examples in Table 3 are the only ones to occur more than once in the reference corpus of New Zealand speeches. ("Number 8 wire" here is a reference to New Zealanders' practical ingenuity and ability to fix any mechanical problem at minimal cost.)

Extended use of figurative, idiomatic and expressive language occurs more often in the corpus of New Zealand speeches, as in the similes and metaphors in example set [5].

[5]

We don't want to be that inn keeper who will take advantage of an over-booked town to charge exorbitant rates.
Countries and individuals must either surf these powerful waves of change or get crushed trying to stop them.
The question is when do you fix the roof? When the sun is shining or when it's raining? Well when the sun's shining we go to the beach.
The opposing team has been much like a synchronised swimming team – polished in delivery but the nose peg masks a slightly tainted smell.

The higher frequency and greater richness of extended idioms in the New Zealand intranational corpus compared with the ALFE corpus supports the hypothesis stated above, and suggests that speakers and speechwriters cut down on idioms, especially those which are culture-bound, in order to maintain international intelligibility. Anecdotally, this finding was further supported by a speechwriter for former President of The Philippines Fidel Ramos, who recalled that she and her fellow writers were instructed to take out any idiomatic expressions that might cause intelligibility problems in the then President's speeches to ASEAN audiences (Isabela Banzon Mooney, personal communication, 2006).

Findings from Academic Journal Articles Corpus

This larger corpus, taken from two online journals, shows the lowest frequency of idioms, with only 177 tokens and a ratio of one to every 554 words. Table 4 shows the idioms which occur more than once in the 19 academic articles, and example set [6] lists some of the idioms found only once (hapaxes).

Table 4
Most frequent figurative expressions in academic articles corpus

| Lemma | Number of Occurrences | Number of Speeches |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| washback (effect) | 6 | 1 |
| cultivate (writing strategies) | 5 | 3 |
| the king is (really) naked | 2 | 2 |
| a skeleton in the cupboard | 2 | 1 |

[6] Hapaxes (single occurrences)

...cognitive bottleneck

...weeded out social factors...

When theoretical saturation was achieved,...

To liberate English from native speakers is still a long and winding road

The comparison between the three corpora is shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Comparison of the three corpora

| Corpus | Size | Idioms (Tokens) | Ratio of Idioms to Total Words |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| ALFE corpus | 33,074 words 30 speeches | 121 | 1:270 |
| NZ business corpus | 34,884 words 30 speeches | 157 | 1:216 |
| Academic article corpus | 98,000 words 19 articles | 177 | 1:554 |

The hypothesis concerning reduced use of idioms in academic discourse is thus supported; idioms occur only rarely in the academic articles: one of the tokens, the clichéd expression ‘two sides of a coin’, occurs in an article title, not in the main text. Students taking academic English writing programmes are often advised to avoid idioms, especially clichés. For example Gairns and Redman (1986) appear to promote the view that idioms are only available to L1 users (‘native speakers’), when they claim that “[c]ertain native speakers might ‘get the ball rolling’, but few foreign learners could carry off this idiom without sounding faintly ridiculous” (p. 36).

One implication arising from these admittedly limited findings is that higher-frequency idiom use is more likely to occur in local or in-group contexts, where the idiomatic expressions are understood, as opposed to in out-group contexts such as ASEAN gatherings and articles in academic journals.

4. Findings from Survey of Brunei Undergraduate Students' Awareness of Idioms

In April 2015 a cohort of 39 third- and fourth-year undergraduates majoring in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Brunei Darussalam completed a survey which aimed to assess their active and passive knowledge of some English idiomatic expressions. Brunei has a bilingual Malay- and English-medium system of education. This cohort studied English as a subject from Primary year 1, then from Primary year 4 an increasing number of subjects through English-medium, notably Science and Mathematics. The university's entry requirements include a credit in both English and Malay in the Brunei Cambridge General Certificate of Education (Ordinary level), normally taken in year 11 (Secondary year 5). They were invited to tick one of three boxes opposite some standard idioms in order to show whether they used the idioms themselves, whether they would be understood if used when speaking to them, or whether they were unable to figure out the meaning of the idiom. The partial results for six expressions are shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Idiomatic awareness of 39 UBD undergraduate students, April 2015

| | Idiom | I use this myself | I understand this | ? I don't understand this |
|---|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Right. Let's get the ball rolling | 11 | 24 | 4 |
| 2 | (This university) punches above its weight | 2 | 10 | 24 |
| 3 | We mustn't put the cart before the horse | 0 | 4 | 30 |
| 4 | He was blacklisted for failing to pay his debts | 30 | 6 | 0 |
| 5 | Every coin has two sides | 19 | 12 | 5 |
| 6 | Sour grapes | 7 | 5 | 24 |

We can suggest reasons for these quite strong variations in the idiomatic awareness of this fairly homogeneous group of young bilingual Bruneians. Item 4 in the table, 'blacklisted', is the idiom that is by far the best understood and most used, is also found in Malay through a process of calquing: 'disenaraihitamkan', where 'senarai' is 'list' and 'hitam' is 'black'. The next best-known is idiom 5, 'every coin has two sides', which does not have an exact Malay equivalent, but is relatively transparent. It occurs frequently in students' academic writing, especially in two-sided academic essays. In spite of the reservations of Gairns and Redman, quoted above, idiom 1, 'let's get the ball rolling' is also understood by almost all, and 11 out of 39 claim that they use it themselves.

Idiom 3, 'cart before the horse', however, is unfamiliar to these students, with none of them claiming to use it themselves and only four claiming that they understand it.

This is partly because horses and carts are largely unfamiliar to Bruneians, except through television and movies, but also because the meaning is opaque rather than transparent, as it used to refer to doing things in the wrong order of priority, i.e. dealing with trivial before substantive issues. Idiom 2, ‘punches above its weight’ is likewise little-used and understood by a large majority of this Brunei student cohort. It may well be more familiar to Filipino students (thanks to the achievements of world boxing champions such as Manny Pacquiao). Although seven students claim that they use Idiom 6, ‘sour grapes’, themselves, it is not understood by the majority, perhaps because it originates from Aesop’s fable of the fox and the grapes, retold by La Fontaine in the 17th century. This cohort of Bruneian students thus demonstrate an uneven level of awareness of these six clichéd idioms, which all contain elements of unilateral idiomaticity.

They were also asked about their familiarity with some local English idioms, previously collected and found to be a feature of Brunei English not used in any ‘inner circle’ variety of English. ‘Dry season’ refers to the time between the middle of the month and payday at the end of the month when people may run short of money and be unable to pay bills and debts, whilst ‘action only’ (usually pronounced ‘aksen’) describes people who do not deliver on what they promise. The same three choices were given for these idioms, with results as shown in Table 7.

Table 7
Idiomatic awareness of 39 UBD undergraduate students, April 2015: local idioms

| | Idiom | I use this myself | I understand this | ? I don’t understand this |
|---|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | I can’t pay you back now: dry season, bah | 23 | 14 | 0 |
| 2 | That fellow, action (‘aksen’) only | 32 | 7 | 0 |

These and other idioms which derive from the local, in this case Bruneian, sociocultural context, are very familiar and are used by a substantial majority of the student survey participants. As with the variations on ‘standard’ L1 idioms such as ‘barking at the wrong tree’ instead of ‘barking up the wrong tree’, these can be seen as instances of “creative idiomaticity” in which the idioms do not derive from L1 idioms. The “dry season” idiom may well derive from local languages: ‘musim kemarau’ (Malay, season-dry, ‘dry season’) is used in Malay with the same meaning. ‘Action’, as used in Table 7 idiom 2, represents a lexical shift away from the L1 literal meaning.

5. Discussion: Pedagogical Implications

The existence of comparable idioms having the same or similar force across a range of languages leads to implications which are contrary to those of the findings from the three corpora discussed above. Those findings suggest that it would be better to advise advanced-level learners to cut down on idiom use when making speeches or writing for an international audience or readership, in order to maintain intelligibility.

However, the ability to use idiomatic expressions appropriately is highly prized as a marker of high linguacultural proficiency. So if we can show that all Southeast Asian languages are rich in idiomatic expressions, and that many of these show equivalences when their deeper meaning is unpacked, we are led towards a different application for teachers of English, at all levels (Sew, 2015). That is, there is potential for drawing on learners' multilingual resources, in particular their idiomatic competence in whatever languages they bring to the classroom with them, in order to uncover these idiomatic equivalences. Equivalent idioms from Malay, Filipino, and from the Borneo-indigenous Iban and Bidayuh languages, listed in Table 8, can serve to illustrate this point.

Table 8
Equivalent idioms across languages

| | Idiom+Gloss | Source Language | English Equivalent | Interpretation |
|---|---|----------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | Pagputi ng uwak (when crow turns white) Pag-itim ng tagak (when stork turns black) | Filipino | When hell freezes over / When pigs fly | Something very unlikely to happen |
| 2 | Kuching bertanduk (when cats have horns) | Malay | When hell freezes over / When pigs fly | Something very unlikely to happen |
| 3 | Makati ang paa (itchy feet) | Filipino | Itchy feet | Person who never stays long in one place |
| 4 | Sarang tebuan jangan dijolok (Don't disturb a hornet's nest) | Malay | Let sleeping dogs lie | Don't create unnecessary trouble |
| 5 | Beri betis hendak paha (Give your calf, want your thigh) | Malay | Give them an inch, they'll take a mile | People always want more than you give them |
| 6 | Agi idup, agi nyelaban (have life have hope) | Iban (East Malaysia) | While there's life there's hope | Fight on to the very end |
| 7 | Birumus (cultivate in expectation of a harvest) | Bidayuh (East Malaysia) | As you sow so shall you reap | Make an effort and expect a return |
| 8 | Enggang sama enggang, pipit sama pipit (hornbill with hornbill, sparrow with sparrow) | Malay | Birds of a feather flock together | People prefer to mix with their own kind |

In idioms 3 and 6 the figurative elements are the same, giving an exact equivalence. In the other examples in Table 8, the same underlying meaning is expressed by different non-compositional elements (Grant, 2007; Grant & Bauer, 2004). The Bruneian students who participated in the survey discussed in the above section in some cases supplied equivalent Malay idioms to those in the survey form, showing awareness of the cross-language equivalence. One student, of Chinese ethnicity, kindly provided the Chinese equivalent of the ‘sour grapes’ idiom, along with an explanation and transliteration, showing that Chinese uses an almost identical idiomatic expression.

Further demonstrating that the cross-language comparison of idioms can be extended throughout Southeast Asia, Thai equivalent idioms for three of those listed in Table 8 are shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9
Thai idioms

| | Idiom+Gloss | Source Language | English Equivalent | Interpretation |
|---|--|------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | ชีพจรลงเท้า (Pulses fall on your feet) | Thai | Itchy feet | Person who never stays long in one place |
| 2 | อย่ามองหาไล่พวก (Don't look for fleas on others to get them on your own head) | Thai | Let sleeping dogs lie | Don't create unnecessary trouble |
| 3 | ให้คืบหนึ่งคืบ ให้ศอกหนึ่งศอก (Give him an inch, and he'll take a yard.) | Thai | Give them an inch, they'll take a mile | People always want more than you give them |

(Source: Thanis Bunsom, personal communication)

In a context such as the Philippines where MTBMLE is established as national-level language-in-education policy, it is feasible and appropriate to draw on students' knowledge of idioms in the languages they bring to the classroom. Especially for those who use a local vernacular language in their home and family domains, the value of these home languages can be affirmed by asking students to interview their parents and more senior family members in order to collect idioms, which can then be compared and shared in class. They can then try to connect and find idioms with similar meaning across languages. The local and national languages are thus valued and not excluded from the ELT classroom: work done and ideas raised in ELT classroom contexts can be taken beyond the confines of the classroom. The materials required for such an exercise would of course depend on the level of the students: at the primary level, when students in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand and the Philippines may be having to learn their respective national languages prior to studying English, a simple grid based on that used in Table 8 above could be used, with some examples of equivalent idioms provided and others left blank.

Table 10
Equivalent idioms across languages – worksheet template

| | Filipino Idiom | Idiom in My Language | English Equivalent | Interpretation |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | Pagputi ng uwak Pag-itim ng tagak | | When hell freezes over / When pigs fly | Something very unlikely to happen |
| 2 | Makati ang paa | | Itchy feet | Person who never stays long in one place |

There is also potential for information-gap exercises in pairs or small groups, with different students or groups being given a grid of this type with different items missing. For learning idioms which are not exactly equivalent, teachers can develop idiom matching exercises. Higher-level learners can be asked to decode the interpretation of unfamiliar idioms in the target languages, using approaches exemplified by Sew (2015, p. 18, pp. 19-21) with reference to Chinese and Malay idioms, facilitating access to cultural grammars and cultural scripts through study of idiomatic convergences and divergences across languages.

In MTB-MLE contexts there is one possible risk that teachers need to be conscious of: students may feel a sense of shame at having to open up about their ethnolinguistic origins which they may normally conceal. Thus they may prefer not to disclose information pertaining to their home language, if this is a minority vernacular with little power or social prestige. But countering such discourses which minoritise and stigmatise local languages is very much in line with the objectives of MTB-MLE policies, as noted by Martin (2015, p. 114, citing Dekker, 2010).

6. Conclusion

This article has addressed issues of idiom awareness and use, idiomaticity (including creative and unilateral idiomaticity) and idiomatic competence. Findings from the three corpora suggest that idiom use may be reduced in order to ensure intelligibility in contexts where English is used as an Asian or ASEAN lingua franca (ALFE), as well as in academic writing. In in-group or intranational contexts where all participants share the same language variety and culture, richer idiom use is likely to be found. The survey of idiomatic awareness among Bruneian students has demonstrated the potential for inclusion of idiomaticity in ELT curricula at different levels, along with the benefits of a comparative cross-language approach to idiomaticity.

Idioms which are peculiar to intranational varieties of English in Southeast Asia are unlikely to show up in international contexts. This is because the Southeast Asian participants in the regional gatherings, coming from highly multilingual societies, are able to switch between varieties and registers according to whether their audience is intra- or international.

A question worthy of further research arising from this study is whether discursial features common to Southeast Asian societies may be evident in ALFE contexts, as these may be reflections of pan-Asian norms such as audience awareness, politeness, deference towards royalty and towards political leaders.

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