
Set expressions and clichés in learner discourse

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Annotation

This article examines the stylistic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions of set expressions and clichés presented in English language textbooks designed for learners. Using a qualitative content analysis, approximately 250 expressions were extracted from 13 widely used textbooks at levels A2 to B2. The study categorizes expressions by type, function, register, and cultural reference, with a particular focus on how they are framed in model dialogues, reading texts, and writing samples. The findings reveal a strong reliance on predictable and widely taught formulaic expressions, especially academic and conversational clichés. Register distinctions are rarely made explicit, and idiomatic or culturally diverse expressions appear infrequently and are often decontextualized. Most expressions reflect standardized Anglophone discourse norms, with minimal inclusion of local or global English varieties. While these expressions offer structural support for learners, they may also restrict stylistic development and pragmatic flexibility. The study highlights the need for ELT materials to include more varied, register-aware, and culturally inclusive expressions to support stylistic competence in global communication contexts.

Keywords

Formulaic language, clichés, English language textbooks, stylistic competence, pragmatic awareness, register, Englishization, cultural discourse, learner input, ELT

Устойчивые выражения и клише в дискурсе изучающих английский язык

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Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются стилистические, прагматические и культурные аспекты представления устойчивых выражений и клише в учебниках английского языка для изучающих. С помощью качественного контент-анализа было проанализировано около 250 выражений, извлечённых из 13

широко используемых учебников уровней A2–B2. Выражения классифицировались по типу, функции, регистру и культурной отнесённости. Особое внимание уделялось контексту их использования — в модельных диалогах, чтении и письменных образцах. Результаты показали преобладание шаблонных, часто преподаваемых клише, особенно в академическом и разговорном стиле. Различия в регистре, как правило, не поясняются, а идиоматические или культурно окрашенные выражения встречаются редко и зачастую вне контекста. Подавляющее большинство выражений отражают стандартизированные нормы англоязычного дискурса, при этом почти не представлены локальные или глобальные варианты английского. Хотя такие выражения дают учащимся структурную опору, они могут ограничивать развитие стилистической гибкости и прагматической осведомлённости. В статье подчёркивается необходимость включения в УМК более разнообразных, контекстуализированных и культурно инклюзивных выражений для подготовки к реальной глобальной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова *Формульный язык, клише, учебники английского языка, стилистическая компетенция, прагматическая осведомленность, регистр, англицизация, культурный дискурс, учебный материал, преподавание английского*

Ingliz tili o'quvchilari nutqida qo'llaniladigan iboralar va klishealar

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Annotatsiya *Ushbu maqolada ingliz tilini o'rganuvchilar uchun mo'ljallangan darsliklarda qo'llaniladigan barqaror iboralar va klishealarning stilistik, pragmatik va madaniy jihatlari tahlil qilinadi. Sifatli kontent tahlili asosida A2–B2 darajadagi 13 ta keng tarqalgan darslikdan taxminan 250 ta ibora ajratib o'rganildi. Iboralar turi, funksiyasi, uslubi va madaniy manbasiga ko'ra tasniflandi, ayniqsa ularning dialog, matn va yozma namunalarda qanday berilganiga e'tibor qaratildi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, o'quvchilarga ko'p hollarda akademik yoki suhbatdo'stona uslubdagi, oldindan tayyorlangan iboralar taklif etiladi. Uslub (registr) haqida aniq izohlar berilmaydi, idiomatik yoki madaniy jihatdan rang-barang iboralar kam va kontekstsiz uchraydi. Ko'pchilik iboralar standart ingliz tiliga asoslangan bo'lib, mahalliy yoki global ingliz variantlari deyarli mavjud emas. Ushbu iboralar grammatik asos sifatida foydali bo'lsa-da, ular o'quvchilarning stilistik erkinligi va pragmatik moslashuvchanligini cheklashi mumkin. Maqolada ELT*

materiallariga yanada kontekstga mos, uslubiy va madaniy jihatdan inklyuziv iboralarni kiritish zarurligi ta'kidlanadi.

Kalit so'zlar *Barqaror iboralar, klishelar, ingliz tili darsliklari, stilistik kompetensiya, pragmatik tushuncha, uslub, inglizlashtirish, madaniy nutq, o'quv materiallari, ingliz tilini o'qitish*

Introduction

Formulaic language, fixed expressions such as idioms, collocations, and sentence frames, plays a significant role in second language acquisition (SLA). These expressions facilitate fluency, support discourse cohesion, and serve pragmatic functions ranging from politeness to persuasion. In educational settings, particularly at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels, textbooks are a key resource exposing learners to this type of language. Yet, the choice, presentation, and contextualization of formulaic language in textbooks are not often addressed as topics of critical investigation.

Most research on formulaic language is mainly focused on either its cognitive benefits or processing benefits (Wray, 2013; Ellis, 2012) or the challenges learners face in producing idiomatic and native-sounding discourse (Schmitt, 2004). Meanwhile, critical studies on English language teaching (ELT) materials tend to foreground content coverage (Gray & Block, 2014) or grammatical range, with too little attention to stylistic and cultural dimensions of formulaic input. But phrases like "In my opinion," "That's a shame," or "A piece of cake" are not merely communicative. They also convey tone, cultural assumptions, and stylistic archetypes that shape how learners express themselves.

Furthermore, as long as English remains as global lingua franca, the stylistic norms presented in textbooks can represent a limited set of Anglophone communicative practices,

privileging some forms of expression over others. Coursebooks that over-rely on clichés, disregard register differences, or cast the use of expression in culturally relative terms are likely to generate learner discourse that is formulaic rather than flexible, accurate but not contextual.

This study investigates what kinds of set expressions and clichés are presented in learner-focused English textbooks and how they are stylistically and culturally framed. Based on qualitative analysis of thirteen commonly known and used textbooks and approximately 250 expressions, it examines:

1. The types of expressions are most frequently exemplified
2. Whether students receive adequate register or usage instruction
3. What cultural and ideological presumptions inform choice of expression.

By exploring the stylistic and pragmatic implications of textbook input, the study aims to discover how pedagogical materials shape learner discourse, not just linguistically, but stylistically and culturally. It contributes to SLA debates, discourse analysis of textbooks, and research into global English, and offers implications for teachers, textbook authors, and researchers interested in maximizing the communicative value and cultural sensitivity of English language education.

Literature Review

Set expressions and clichés, such as idioms, collocations, and set sentence frames, are pillars to effective and stylistically competent use of language. In second language

acquisition (SLA), such expressions indicate not only linguistic competence but also learners' knowledge of pragmatic norms and discourse conventions. Textbooks, being key input sources, often depict such phrases, having an impact on learner use. This review discusses theoretical and empirical issues of formulaic language, cultural and stylistic transfer, Englishization, and the role of textbooks in furnishing a foundation for exploring how stylistic norms are embedded in pedagogical materials.

Formulaic language improves learner fluency, coherence, and idiomaticity. Pawley and Syder (1983) first proposed the concept of "lexicalized sentence stems," demonstrating that native speakers use prefabricated chunks to communicate fluently. Wray (2013) and Ellis (2012) develop this, proposing that language acquisition is motivated by habitual exposure to frequent sequences, which are processed and stored holistically. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) proposed pedagogic classifications of these formulas, discourse organizers, sentence builders, and situational utterances, emphasizing their role in conversational competence. Formulaicity of this nature, though, is very much lacking in learner speech production given the restrictions in classroom input. This highlights the importance of textbooks as a vehicle for access to stylistically appropriate, context-sensitive expression.

Students have a tendency to transfer L1 norms to L2, even in areas such as politeness, indirectness, and the use of idioms. Kasper (1992) explains that the transfer can either be positive or negative based on whether or not the norms coincide. Eslami and Noora (2008) found Iranian students employed L1 politeness strategies for English requests, which had a tendency to lead to pragmatic misalignment. Wierzbicka's (2002) work on cultural scripts shows how values such as sincerity or directness vary across languages, influencing the meaning

and use of expressions. House (2006) has defined translation as "re-contextualization," a term also relevant to how learners adapt set expressions. These studies emphasize the cultural underpinnings of formulaic language and the demand for material responsive to such variation.

Despite the increased recognition of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Anglophone norms continue to dominate English language teaching. Jenkins (2006) and Galloway & Numajiri (2019) argue that while teachers may adopt more inclusive paradigms, standardised tests and materials will tend to entrench native-speaker models. Students learn them through textbooks, which often promote clichéd or out-dated forms according to British or American norms. Hodgson (2014) found that such conformity can compromise the linguistic self-confidence of learners. As Englishization spreads, the models of style provided by textbooks risk becoming prescriptive and culturally limited, potentially reducing the expressive potential of learners.

Textbooks not only decide what students talk about, but also how they talk. Tomlinson (2012, 2013) critiques the coursebook commercial market for prioritizing scripted, safe conversation that fails to replicate real stylistic variation. Gray and Block (2014) note that textbooks express ideological stances, such as middle-class individualism, which shape their discourse choices. Phrases like "In my opinion" or "That's a good question" recycled in the coursebook might underpin a restricted stylistic register. Because learners attempt to model textbook language in speech and writing, the set expressions employed in materials will directly inform the composition of their discourse style, and often without contextual description or alternative styles.

Current research upholds that formulaic language plays a vital role in SLA and that pragmatic transfer and Englishization constrain

learner use. However, few studies specifically examines what expressions learners are exposed to from textbooks, or how these reflect stylistic and cultural conventions. There is minimal research that spans textbook content with learner stylistics, especially for the example of clichés and set phrases. This has resulted in a knowledge gap in understanding how material impacts learners' formulaic repertoire and stylistic choices.

This review highlights complex influences on the use of set expressions and clichés by learners: cognitive processing, L1 cultural transfer, and the influence of standardized materials reflecting Anglophone norms. While there is a theoretical consensus on the importance of formulaic language, the actual expressions represented in textbooks, and their cultural, stylistic, and pedagogical implications, remain unexplored. The present study bridges this gap by analysing set phrases in learner textbooks to uncover the stylistic meanings that the books transmit and how they may shape learner discourse.

Methodology

This study investigates the types and functions of set expressions and clichés presented in English learner textbooks. Rather than focusing on learner production, the focus is placed on the input presented to learners through pedagogical materials, and how such input may influence their stylistic and pragmatic development.

The dataset consists of thirteen internationally published English textbooks, ranging in levels from Pre-Intermediate (A2) to Upper-Intermediate (B2). Some series that were studied are *Solutions*, *Headway*, *Navigate*, *Insight*, *Destination*, and others. They were selected based on their popularity, relevance, and availability in general English instruction and test preparation.

Three to five units were selected from each textbook, with a tendency to take sections

that simulated actual discourse, such as dialogues, reading texts, model writing, and vocabulary/grammar boxes. Only expressions that was obviously intended as learner input was considered. Approximately 250 expressions were coded manually in a structured spreadsheet. Every item was categorized by: Type (fixed phrase, idiom, cliché, collocation, set response), Function (giving opinion, persuasion, greeting), Register (formal, informal, neutral, or unstated), Cultural reference (Anglophone-rooted, neutral/global, or other).

The analysis was of qualitative content type, guided by three research questions:

1. What kinds of set expressions and clichés are textbooks presenting?
2. Do they reflect globalized English norms, local cultural values, or both?
3. How can they influence learner discourse stylistically and pragmatically?

Findings were thematically categorized to identify the recurring patterns in stylistic framing, cultural orientation, and pedagogical purpose. Although limited to textbook input, the study gives an indication of how stylistic norms are inscribed in teaching materials and the potential influences on learner language use.

Results

The results of the study show that out of 250 expressions extracted from 13 widely used English language textbooks (*Solutions*, *Headway*, *Navigate*, *Insight*, *Destination*, etc.), the majority fell into three major categories: fixed phrases (102 items, 40.8%), set responses (52 items, 20.8%), and collocations (45 items, 18%). These three types made up nearly 80% of the total. For instance, fixed phrases like "In my opinion", "What do you think of...?", and "On the one hand" were consistently presented as sentence starters in writing models. Set responses such as "That's a shame", "Well done!", and "You poor thing!" were commonly found in dialogues or feedback-based interactions. Collocations like

“make a decision”, “take responsibility”, “save up for”, and “do your best” were introduced

primarily in vocabulary-building tasks.

- Fixed Phrases
- Set Responses
- Collocations
- Idioms & Proverbs
- Clichés



Diagram.1 Distribution of expression types

Idioms and proverbs, comprising 35 items (14%), appeared more frequently in B2-level textbooks such as *Solutions Upper-Intermediate* and *Insight Upper-Intermediate*. These included figurative expressions like “over the moon”, “green with envy”, “a weight off one’s shoulders”, and “blow your top”. While visually or emotionally vivid, these idioms were typically isolated in thematic vocabulary boxes with little contextual usage or guidance on tone, limiting learners’ understanding of appropriate deployment.

Clichés made up a smaller category, with 16 items (6.4%), yet they were distributed widely across proficiency levels. Phrases like “At the end of the day”, “Follow your dreams”, “Step out of your comfort zone”, and “To sum up” were found repeatedly in motivational or reflective sections, often presented without alternatives. For example, “Practice makes perfect” and “Better late than never” occurred across both A2

and B2 levels, indicating a recycling of familiar moral or motivational idioms without offering varied expressions with similar functions.

Register presentation was one of the weakest points across all materials. Only about 6% of expressions were explicitly marked for register (formal, informal, neutral). Many informal phrases appeared without caution. “That sucks!”, found in *Navigate Upper-Intermediate*, was taught in a friendly dialogue but lacked any register warning, risking misuse in formal writing. Similarly, “Guess what?” and “No way!”, though clearly informal, were used in narrative contexts without register discussion. Even clearly academic expressions like “It is certainly true that...”, “The aim of this essay is...”, and “On balance” (from *Headway Intermediate*) were left unannotated, suggesting to students that these were universally applicable.

The functions of expressions varied but were unevenly distributed. Opinion-giving

structures ("I think...", "In my view", "It's better to..."), persuasive language ("Let's face the facts", "Make a difference"), and evaluative responses ("That's a disaster!", "That sounds boring!") dominated. However, certain pragmatic functions such as hedging ("It's a bit special"), politeness ("Is there any chance you could...?"), or disagreement ("I disagree with speaker 1") were less common. Additionally, conversational fillers like "Let me see..." or "Well, you know..." were included in a few places (e.g., *Headway Upper-Intermediate*), but often without functional labelling, which would help learners understand their role in fluency and turn-taking.

Textbooks also showed a tendency to repeat emotionally loaded or overly expressive idioms. "Driving him crazy", "From riches to rags", "That's amazing!", and "I don't believe it!" were all examples of dramatic, colloquial expressions, particularly in listening or reading texts. While such phrases may enhance narrative vividness, their repetition without explanation of tone or setting risks promoting overdramatization or inappropriateness in learners' own output.

The cultural framing of expressions further reflected strong Anglophone bias. More than 80% of the culturally marked items originated from British or American English. For example, "The early bird catches the worm", "You've got to dance like no one's watching", "Warts and all", and "Not on your life!" all carry Western rhetorical traditions, often tied to individualism, optimism, or expressive selfhood. Expressions from learners' local or regional cultures were virtually non-existent. The only expression linked to a non-Western context was "lose face", which appeared in *Solutions Upper-Intermediate*,

but even that was presented without a note on its Asian cultural origins.

Some books displayed thematic consistency but still relied on clichés and set structures. For example, *Insight Upper-Intermediate* included a unit on resilience using phrases like "Being challenged in life is inevitable" and "The only disability in life is a bad attitude", which, although motivational, border on ideological prescriptiveness. Similarly, *Destination B2* included "Let's face the facts" and "The fact of the matter is...", often framing arguments in persuasive or didactic tones, but with limited stylistic alternatives.

Differences across CEFR levels were also apparent. At A2 and B1 levels, expressions were more formulaic, directive, and high frequency: "Nice to meet you!", "I don't mind it", "It's OK", and "Could you repeat that?". These served as communicative scaffolding for beginners. At B2 level, expressions included more idiomatic and metaphorical constructions, such as "throw them out", "roughing it", "dig his heels in", and "feel it in my bones", found in *Insight* and *Navigate Upper-Intermediate*. However, even at higher levels, stylistic instruction remained static, and learners were rarely offered options for varying tone or expression based on social context or communication goals.

Finally, expression recycling across textbooks was frequent. Phrases like "a piece of cake", "make a difference", and "guess what?" appeared in multiple series (*Solutions*, *Destination*, *Headway*), often with identical framing. This may facilitate recognition but contributes to the overuse of safe, templated discourse, potentially at the expense of creativity and adaptability.

In summary, while English language textbooks offer structural and functional models of discourse through fixed phrases, collocations, and idioms, their narrow stylistic scope, lack of register awareness, and cultural homogeneity present limitations. Learners are exposed primarily to standardized, Anglophone patterns of communication that, though grammatically sound, may hinder their stylistic growth, pragmatic sensitivity, and intercultural competence in real-world contexts.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the types of set expressions and clichés presented in English language textbooks, to understand how these materials can impact learners' stylistic development and pragmatic proficiency. The analysis revealed clear patterns: excessive reliance on set phrases and formulaic templates, widespread under provision of register information, and Anglophone-biased cultural presentation of language input. Combined, these trends suggest that textbooks provide students with structurally useful but stylistically narrow models of English discourse.

The overuse of set expressions and pedagogical clichés, such as "In my opinion," "On the other hand," and "At the end of the day," implies a tendency toward textbooks that prioritize safe, formulaic language over stylistic diversity. While such language can serve as helpful scaffolding, especially at the intermediate level, excessive use across levels and situations risks producing templated, fixed learner language. This supports Wray (2013) and Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992) findings that caution against overdependence on non-developing formulaic sequences, which are not

developmental and culminate in inflexible patterns of discourse.

The limited recourse to idioms and figurative language, and their superficial treatment, also contributes to a stylistic flatness in learner models. As Ellis (2012) proposes, learners not only need exposure to formulaic language but also good contextualization in order to notice tone, function, and variation. Otherwise, expression is mechanical, not communicative.

Another significant finding was the virtual total absence of register marking across the textbooks. Students were rarely informed whether an expression was formal, informal, or neutral, and even high-stakes expressions like "This essay will discuss..." or "That sucks!" were bare of stylistic markers. This is also in line with critiques by Tomlinson (2013), who argues that most ELT materials assume a one-size-fits-all approach to modelling language, excluding the social judgments learners need to make, to make appropriate choices.

These omissions may lead to pragmatic mismatches, where learners apply informal phrases in formal contexts (and vice versa), not just affecting clarity but also perceived competence. As Kasper (1992) and Eslami (2010) contend, pragmatic failure typically stems from a result of ineffective teaching in style and tone: domains where textbooks continue to fall short.

Most striking, perhaps, was the cultural and ideological narrowness of the expressions covered. With over 80% of idioms and stylistically marked phrases of British or American English provenance, textbooks offer a standardized, culturally sanitised model of English. Expressions like "Follow your dreams,"

“Break the ice,” and “Make a difference” encode middle-class, individualistic values common in Anglophone cultures, but not necessarily transferable to learners’ immediate contexts.

This supports earlier critique by Jenkins (2006) and Gray & Block (2014), in that textbooks habitually reflect globalised English norms on the basis of prestige varieties, rather than embracing World Englishes or local diversity. The fact that culturally specific idioms or expressions from the learners’ L1 are virtually absent suggests an implicit preference for Englishization, a linguistic and cultural assimilation to standardized global English.

This ideological shaping extends beyond lexis: it implicitly socializes learners into certain discourse genres, promoting directness, positivity, and formulaic politeness, at the expense of other rhetorical alternatives.

The findings have important implications for language instruction and textbook development. Learners exposed to predominantly formulaic and culturally limited input are likely to develop a stylistically limited repertoire, potentially constraining their ability to communicate authentically and appropriately in diverse contexts. Teachers and materials developers should attempt to:

- Vary the categories and tones of expressions covered in textbooks
- Add register labels and usage notes
- Encourage comparison of multiple expressions with identical functions
- Incorporate idioms, metaphors, and expressions from non-Anglophone cultures, especially when used in international English

These innovations would better reflect the realities of global English usage and help

learners to be not just grammatically correct, but stylistically versatile and pragmatically aware.

While the study offers an insight into expression input in textbooks, it does not examine classroom interaction or learner use. Future studies could explore how such modelled expressions are repeated, transformed, or resisted in learner discourse. A comparative study of locally produced and global textbooks would also be illuminating regarding how different educational systems approach stylistic modelling.

Conclusion

This study examined the types and stylistic functions of set expressions and clichés in English learner textbooks, in relation to their potential for influencing learners’ discourse. The findings revealed extensive reliance on fixed, formulaic expressions, particularly writing frames and conversational formulas, cared little for register, contextual nuance, or cultural variation. While these expressions serve structural support, their repetitive and decontextualized presentation risks promoting stylistically narrow and pragmatically rigid learner output.

The analysis also uncovered evidence of a persistent ideological and cultural framing across textbooks, wherein Anglophone norms dominate and other rhetorical traditions do not exist. This mirrors broader Englishization tendencies and suggests problems regarding the inclusivity and authenticity of language models in ELT textbooks.

To help learners develop expressive, flexible, and context-sensitive language skills, textbook design must move beyond formulaic

safety. Greater register awareness, stylistic diversity, and intercultural representation must be addressed. Through this approach, materials

can better prepare learners not just to pass exams, but to communicate constructively in a range of authentic contexts.

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