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THE INFLUENCE OF THE IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS ON ENHANCING EFL LANGUAGE  
FLUENCY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to explore the importance of idiomatic expressions' Knowledge for Sudanese tertiary level students to promote language fluency. The researcher has adopted a descriptive analytical method via questionnaire, pretest, and posttest as main tools for gathering the data concerning the study. The sample of the questionnaire study is composed of 43 lecturers and assistant professors of English language in the Nile Valley University and other Sudanese Universities. The sample of the pretest and the posttest was a purposive sample of approximately 60 undergraduate university students. They were all third-year students. The data obtained from the questionnaire have been processed computationally with SPSS program to examine the correctness of the hypothesis of this study. The results from these tools have shown that knowledge of idiomatic expressions is important for Sudanese tertiary level students to promote language fluency.

**Key words:** Knowledge – idiomatic expressions – language fluency

Introduction

This paper would highlight the importance of idioms' knowledge in promoting language use and fluency at the tertiary level. Idiomatic expressions are used in all forms of discourse: in conversations, lectures, movies, radio broadcasts, television programs, and so on as well as their usage is so common in English that it seems very difficult (and occasionally unnatural) for Second Language learners to function effectively in a Second Language communication context without the knowledge of idioms. Therefore, learning English idioms is essential to Second Language learners, and every Second Language learner must prepare himself or herself to meet these challenges. In fact, Second Language learners should learn not only the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the target language but the idioms as well to integrate into the culture of the target Language. A study by Seccord and Wiig (1993) confirmed that the knowledge of idioms is essential in reading and social communication. But what is an idioms? An idiom is defined as "a complex item which is longer than a word- form but shorter than a sentence and which has a meaning that cannot be derived from the knowledge of its component parts" (Cramley 2004 ).This is supported by the definition given in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009 ) states that an idiom is "a group of words that have a special

meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word. For example „under the weather“ is an idiom meaning „ill“ . As it is known that English is a language with vast idiomatic basis, which makes its learning very exciting and intriguing. So, the good command of idioms is very important for fluency as the idioms derived from the culture of the nation and from the day –to –day life .It is proved that only people who are very good at speaking English can adequately and to the point use idiomatic expressions in their speech. Idiomatic Expressions usually cause serious problems with English Language learners, primarily because they do not know the culture and history behind English idioms. In addition to that, the bad teaching methods and the ineffective techniques may cause a problem in understanding, memorizing and acquiring idioms. Undoubtedly, idiomatic expressions make the language of the speakers more vivid and exciting. They make the speaker paints a wonderful portrait of the language.

#### **Aims and scope of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the importance of the idiomatic expressions knowledge in developing the speaking skill for Sudanese tertiary level students. The scope of the study is limited to thirty lecturers of Linguistics and English with different qualifications and experiences who taught in various Sudanese universities. In addition to the students who were third-year students, Department of English, Faculty of Education; Nile Valley University , Sudan in the academic year 2015 – 2016.

#### **Literature review**

##### **Importance of Idiomatic Expressions to Language Users**

Why idioms are important to be known?. Why is practicing idioms a worthwhile activity in the classroom? Why is it important, or perhaps even absolutely necessary, for language learners to understand idioms in the target language?

Idioms include all areas of life. Idioms include medical areas, there are colour idioms, such as 'a black look' or 'be in the black', food idioms 'piece of cake', business idioms, money idioms, animal idioms and body idioms, such as 'armed to teeth' meaning 'heavily armed with deadly weapons'. (Maftonn and Mazloomi, 2005)

Idioms or idiomatic expressions are used in formal, informal speech and in writing. They are a part of media, standard speech in business and an essential element in education. Idiomatic expressions are part of the average native speakers vocabulary. They are an important part of native speakers language and considered to be mutually shared knowledge among English native speakers. Thus it is important for the non-native speakers of English to be acquainted to the use of idiomatic expressions because it is an important part of their mastery of the English language.

Idiomatic use is believed to broaden peoples' comprehension and understanding in all the linguistic aspects of life. Idiomatic use is believed to increase peoples' manipulation of language. As a result, idiomatic use ought to be a part of the second-language learners (L2) vocabulary. Students of English who effectively communicate using idiomatic expressions show a better understanding of English and they have an ability to "communicate on a deeper level of the language". (Ambrose, 2009 ) L2 students can gain more vocabulary through the use of idiomatic expressions, gain a better understanding of the language, achieve more proficiency while using the L2 or second language and sound more like native speakers because idiomatic usage is considered more natural. As it is stated by Laflin quoted by Ambrose (2009 ) "if you keep an open mind and play your cards right, your proficiency in English will soon be something to crow about". It is necessary, therefore, that L2 learners should be acquainted with the use of idiomatic expressions.

Many language specialists pinpoint that knowledge of idioms, that is the ability to comprehend and use them appropriately and adequately is extremely important and considered to be as an indicator of L2 fluency and a sign of L2 communicative competence. The ability to produce and comprehend idioms is termed as "figurative competence". Figurative competence, or the sufficient knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in a second/foreign language requires certain skills and includes the ability to produce and use idioms when

engaging in communication, whether spoken or written. Thus adequate idiom knowledge leads to better L2 fluency making second/foreign language learners more L2 proficient. (Andreou and Galantomos, (2009 )

### Acquisition of Idioms

Acquisition represents the process of the input which leads to production or the output. Swain (1993 ) summarizes the output hypothesis by stating that “through producing language, either spoken or written, language acquisition/learning may occur” and that the essence of the output hypothesis lies in learners taking responsibility for their own learning. The author claims that by using the target language as frequently as possible, the intuition regarding fluency can be developed. This is true not only when learning idioms but for all educational settings, meaningful practice of linguistic resources permits “the development of automaticity in their use . Swain (1993) also, states that when “learners produce language they are forced to recognize what they do not know, making the gap in their knowledge base visible”.

There are at least three responses that learners might have to this gap, one of them being to “identify it and pay attention to relevant input” Swain (1993) which often is provided by teachers. This gives the learners an opportunity to modify their output, making collaborative activities important.

Cooper (1999). writes that an area clearly worthy of investigation is how second language learners acquire idioms. However, “most of the research on idioms has Teaching Idiomatic Expressions involved native speakers of English. Models of L1 idiom acquisition therefore offer a starting point”

Cooper (1999 ) also states that "idiom acquisition research has uncovered a number of findings that have pedagogical implication for idiom instruction”

The author mentions three competing hypotheses regarding how idioms are processed and these are developed into a systematic plan for teaching idioms in the classroom.

**The first one**, the *literal first hypothesis*, consists of two modes: one that processes the literal meaning and one that processes the figurative meaning of an idiom. The former is normally the active one while the latter comes into play when the literal meaning does not fit into the speech context.

**The second one**, the *simultaneous processing hypothesis*, claims that idioms are stored and retrieved in the mental lexicon as chunks. Literal and figurative meaning interact and the interpretation that best fits the context is sorted out.

The *direct access model* is the third one and it only makes use of the figurative meaning of an idiom. This proposes that a literal analysis of an idiomatic expression is very rare.

According to Cooper (1998) six variables important for idiom comprehension and learning have been revealed. These variables will now be presented and summarized.

The first variable concerns the age of the learner. It reconnects to Piaget’s theory of cognitive development – a child moves through different stages of mental development and he or she has to reach a certain level of maturity before being able to acquire certain knowledge. Lundahl summarizes by stating that “*Think before you speak* works as an exhortation within this approach” Cooper (2006). Cooper (1998) states that

*“[y]oung children up to the age of about nine generally tend to interpret idioms (and other figurative expressions) literally”*

The second variable concerns teachers and their use of figurative language in classrooms. Idioms occupied the second place when the frequency of figurative expressions was examined,

“so that by eighth grade 11.5 per cent of a teacher’s utterances, or about one out of ten, contained idioms” (Cooper 1998).

Since teachers quite frequently use idioms, they can limit learners’ comprehension if they are interpreted literally.

Thirdly, the characteristics of an idiom can determine whether the acquisition of it is easy or not.

*“Frozen idioms are learned more quickly than flexible idioms because they are heard more frequently in only one syntactic form rather than in several and are, therefore, internalized as a single lexical item” (Cooper 1998).*

The closeness between the idiom’s literal and figurative meanings (the metaphoric transparency) is also an aspect that has to be taken into account.

The fourth variable is connected to the context in which the idioms are presented. Idioms that appear in a context are easier for learners to understand since they can make use of previous information to interpret the figurative meaning.

The fifth variable is that it can be helpful to group idioms according to a theme. Cooper (1998 ) suggests that it can be

*“according to the main word they contain, such as verbs” or “according to their underlying metaphorical themes” such as “argument is war, e.g., I’ve never won an argument with him”.*

The final variable concerns second language learners. Previous research has shown that idioms that were identical in the first and the target language were the easiest to comprehend and produce. Similar idioms were produced with some interference from the first language while idioms that were completely different in both languages were the hardest both to comprehend and produce. The idioms that were comprehended and produced correctly “were frequently used in everyday speech, were transparent, and [...] had simple vocabulary structure” (Ibid., p. 259).

All of these research findings on idiom acquisition have been used to create teaching suggestions.

### Methods of the study

The researcher used the descriptive analytical method in an attempt to describe the research problem as it is.

### Tools of the study

Two instruments of data collection were used (i) a survey questionnaire; the questionnaire was conducted by 30 lecturers at different Sudanese universities (ii) tests (pre-test and post-test). The tests were done by the third-year students, Department of English, Faculty of Education; Nile Valley University. Each instrument has an important role in the survey work, as each instrument is suitable for obtaining a specific type of data.

### Results and Discussion

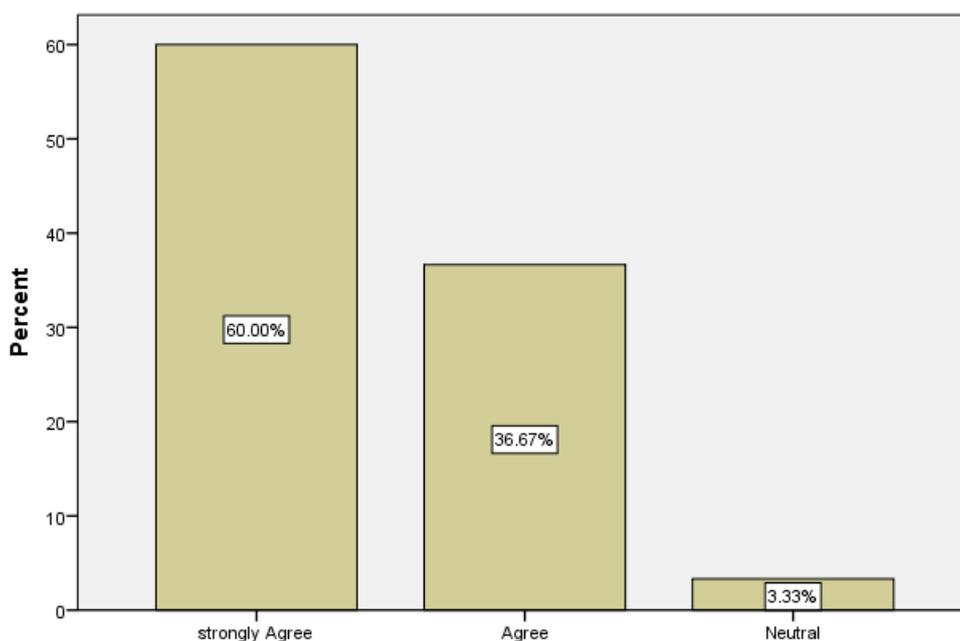
The main data-gathering tool was the questionnaire administered to the lecturers of English language in different universities in Sudan. The aim of this questionnaire was to obtain data to investigate the importance of the idiomatic expressions knowledge in developing the speaking skill for Sudanese tertiary level students. The results were presented in form of tables and charts as shown below.

The analysis of the questionnaire in relation to the importance of the idiomatic expressions knowledge in developing the speaking skill for Sudanese tertiary level students.

Statement No. (1): Idiomatic expressions are common and important in English language studies.

Table and chart No (1) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent’s responses of Statement No.(1).

measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	18	11	1	-	-
Percentage	60	36.7	3.3	-	-

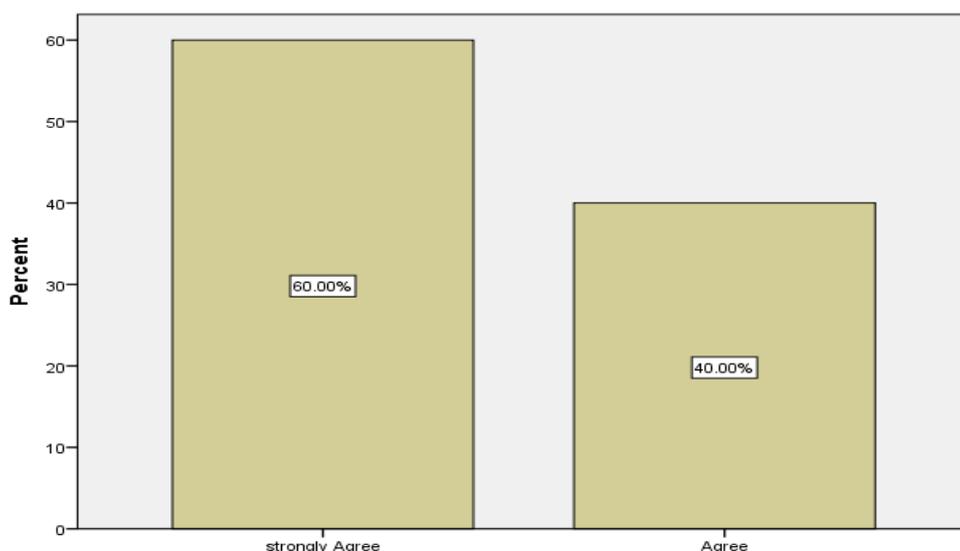


As can be seen in table (1) and chart (1), most of the lecturers (96.7%) strongly agreed and agreed that idiomatic expressions are common and important in English language studies. (3.3%) of the lecturers were not sure. This reflects the importance of the idiomatic expressions for English language learners and studies.

Statement No. (2): Idioms broaden my students’ understanding and manipulation of English language

Table and chart No (2) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent’s responses of Statement No.(2).

Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	18	12	-	-	-
Percentage	60	40	-	-	-



From table (2) and chart (2), it is clear that all the lectures (100%) strongly agreed and agreed that Idioms broaden their students’ understanding and manipulation of English language. This might indicate a general awareness about the importance of idioms in improving the students’ communicative competence.

Statement No. (3): More idioms should be integrated into language curriculum right from the start.

Table and chart No (3) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent’s responses of Statement No.(3).

Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	13	11	2	3	1
Percentage	43.3	36.7	6.7	10	3.3

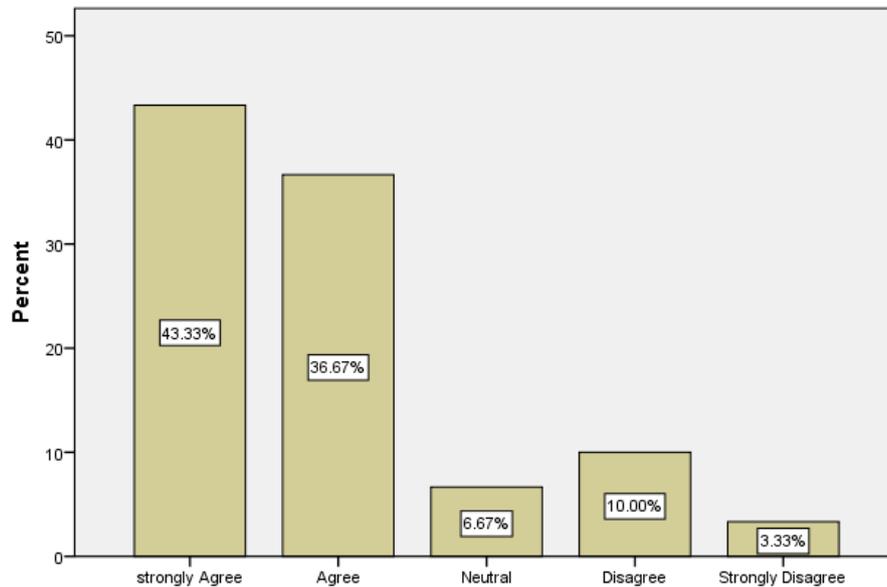


Table (3) and chart (3) show that 80% of the lectures strongly agreed and agreed that idioms should be integrated into language curriculum right from the start, while the percentage (20%) displays the result of neutrality and disagreement. This indicates that the idioms should be included into English language curriculum from the beginning to enrich the learners’ idioms span.

Statement No. (4): The more idioms a learner knows, the richer his vocabulary knowledge becomes.

Table and chart No (4) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent’s responses of Statement No.(4).

Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	19	10	1	-	-
Percentage	63.33	33.33	3.33	-	-

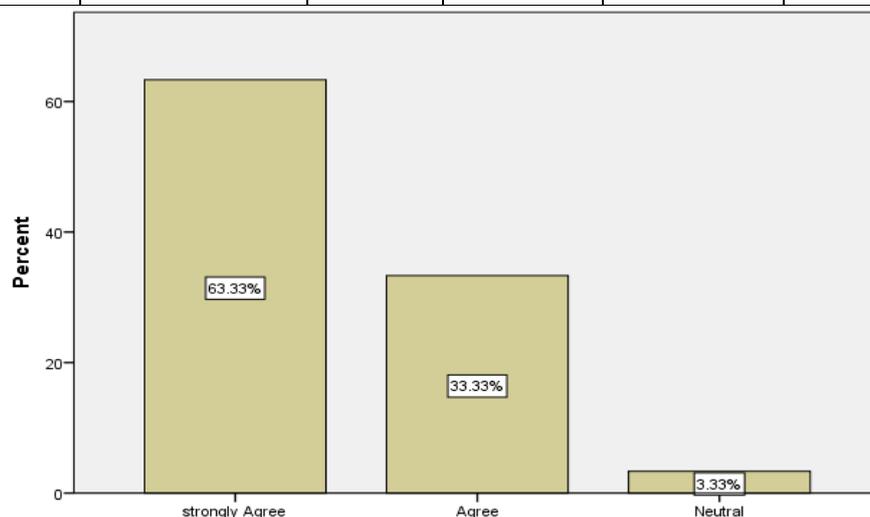


Table (4) and chart (4) reveal that, a great percentage 96.33% of the participants strongly agreed and agreed that more idioms a learner knows, the richer his vocabulary knowledge becomes, while 3.3% neutral. This insured that idioms increase the proportion and improve the quality of the learners' vocabulary.

Statement No. (5): The correct use of idioms is a significant skill for language fluency.

Table and chart No (5) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No. (5).

Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	16	11	1	2	-
Percentage	53.3	36.7	3.3	6.7	-

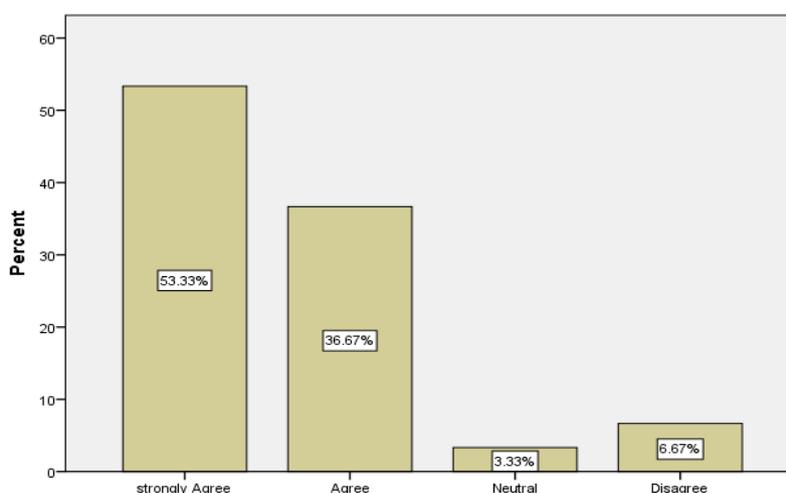


Table (5) and chart (5) point out that the majority of the lecturers (90%) strongly agreed and agreed that the correct use of idioms is a significant skill for language fluency. 6.3% of the participants disagreed and 3.3 were not sure. This result reveals that a good command of idioms leads to a good language fluency.

Statement No. (6): The idiomatic expressions are a vital part of the standard language, and as such can hardly be avoided.

Table and chart No (6) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No.(6).

Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	10	14	3	2	1
Percentage	33.3	46.7	10	6.7	3.3

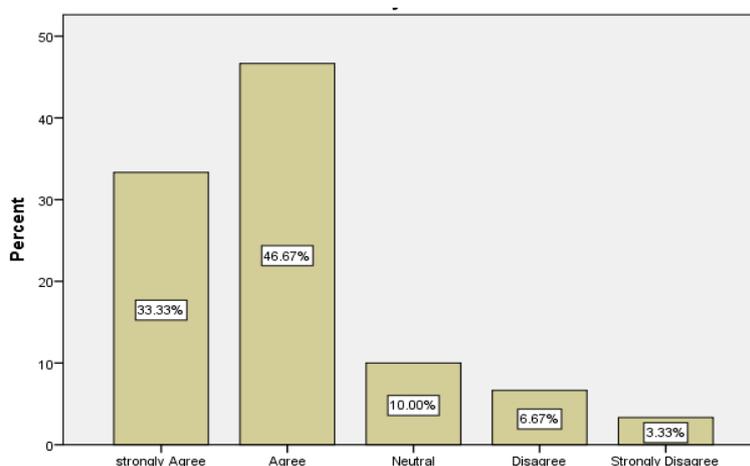


Table (6) and chart (6) indicate that 80% of the participants strongly agreed and agreed that the idiomatic expressions are a vital part of the standard language and as such can hardly be avoided, 10% disagreed and 10% were not sure.

*Statement No. (7): A good command of idiomatic expressions is not important for my students because communicating in simple language is preferable.*

*Table and chart No (7) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's responses of Statement No.(7).*

Measurement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Frequency	9	2	4	10	5
Percentage	30	6.7	13.3	33.3	16.7

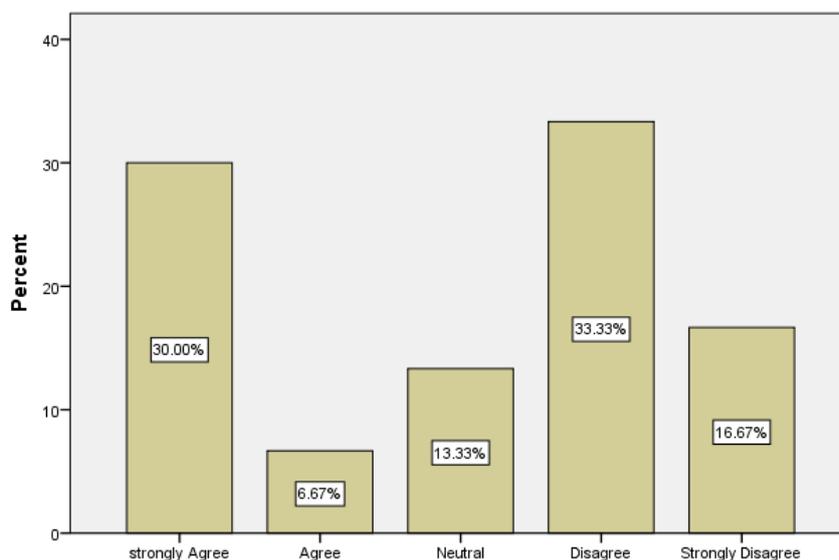


Table (7) and chart (7) show responses on a good command of idiomatic expressions are not important for the learners. 50% of the lecturers strongly disagreed and disagreed that a good command of idiomatic expressions is not important for the learners because communicating in simple language is preferable. 36.7% agreed and 13.3% were not sure. This shows the importance of the idiomatic expressions for the learners in communicating.

### Discussion

The data was collected and analyzed in relation to the hypothesis of the study. The data was collected via a questionnaire which had been distributed to lecturers and assistant professors of English language in Nile Valley University and other Sudanese Universities. Having analyzed and compared the results with the main hypothesis the results have shown that knowledge of idiomatic expressions is important for Sudanese tertiary level students to promote language fluency.

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