

Exploring the EFL Iraqi students' competence in using and understanding idiomatic expressions

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Abstract

For many language learners, especially those of Arabic origin, The most difficult part in learning idiomatic expression is learning both literal and figurative meanings of these idioms. idiom is a multi-word expression which has a meaning different from the sum of the meanings of the words it contains (e.g. Allan 1986, 237, Cruse 1986, 37, Chaika 1982, 200) This

Study aims at: 1- Explaining the idiomatic expressions and clarifying the different types of methods and strategies of English idioms learning that EFL learners used to conclude the meaning of idiomatic expressions. 2-Identifying the Iraqi EFL university students' performance to recognize idioms to help them know the effective use of them. 3- Analyzing the causes of errors made by Iraqi EFL university students in using and understanding the idiomatic expressions. 4- Finding out the learners' errors in using idioms and pointing out whether there are any significant differences between the whole samples' performance.

To full fill the aims, a sample was chosen from the third-year students at the Department of English (College of Education for Humanities / University of Thi-Qar) during the academic year 2020-2021. The number of the sample is 50 students. The researcher makes sure of the variation that could affect the results. All the subjects of the sample are approximately in the same age and have the same linguistic background. The researcher designed an idiom familiarity test to identify the problematic area in using and understanding idiomatic expressions and concluding the meaning of theses idioms. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistic (frequency, mean score, and standard deviation) and inferential statistic (independent sample t-test). The whole results reveal that students exhibit a weak performance in

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the idioms familiarity test, this may be attributed to the lack of idioms subject in the curriculum of Departments of English.

Key Words: *Idiom, Difficulty of L2 Idiom, Idiom processing strategies*

The Problem

"While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins 1972:111). This argument is supported by many researchers who emphasize the significance of vocabulary in the field of foreign language learning and agree that vocabulary is equally, if not more important to structure in language learning. Even if the importance of vocabulary and language 'chunks' in language learning has been recognized, idioms have yet been abandoned. There are only a small number of studies on idioms in EFL contexts particularly Arabic learners of English. Idioms are very difficult to learn, particularly because they are so numerous, and these expressions are interactive items that are laden with extra meanings. As the observation of Mantyla (2004) it is not possible to define idiom in an irrefutable way. It is kind of expression, which cannot be understood from the literal meanings of the words of which they are composed (Rachmadie, Sabrony, 1986:15). An idiom itself is a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning, which are different from the meanings of each word understood on their own (Cambridge Advance Learner's Dictionary, 2003). Cooper (1999: 233) observe that English idioms are difficult for English native speakers, and then they would be much more problematic for EFL learners. Although idiomatic expressions are of great popularity in English, the curriculum of English departments in Iraqi Universities do not focus on teaching this area. Furthermore, instructors encounter complicatedness in choosing idioms and producing suitable teaching methods. Simpson and Mendis (2003) affirmed that teachers find difficulties in choosing which idioms to teach as native speakers' stock of idioms is comprehensive covering wide range of idiomatic expressions.

This study will identify the difficulties that EFL Iraqi students face in using and understanding idioms. As well, examine Iraqi EFL learners' attitudes concerning their favored strategies that can lead teachers to improve efficient methods for idiom teaching. Because, teachers need to recognize the strategies learners use to gain idioms for a successful idioms teaching (Tran 2011). The whole results of the study can encourage language instructors to include idioms in their teaching methods.

Moreover, the study seeks to underline the difficulties EFL Iraqi learners face in understanding and learning English idioms. Also, it can find the strategies language learners develop to comprehend and learn idioms.

The Aim

This study aims at identifying the problematic areas which EFL students may encounter when dealing with idiomatic expression and assessing EFL students' comprehension of English idioms.

The Hypothesis

As non- native speakers of English language, university third- year EFL Iraqi students encounter some difficulties in using and comprehending idiomatic expressions in English because of their dependence on learning words in isolation.

The value

The importance of this study lies in the fact that it can contribute to a better understanding of idiomatic expressions by Iraqi EFL students, since most of the studies on English idioms have concentrated on how native speakers understand them.

Introduction

All languages have Idiomatic expressions that are part and full of them. Spontaneously, native speakers head for using idiomatic expressions without thinking of their figurative meaning. Thus, Idioms are difficult to understand specially for non-native speakers because they do not know what the figure of the idiomatic expression is derived from(i.e. their intentions are usually symbolic). This characteristic makes idioms strange and difficult to understand for English learners. For instance, when EFL learners find the idiomatic expression in sentence like "*I go to visit my grandfather only once in a blue moon; he lives in a remote farm house.*" , they will find it difficult to understand. Since they cannot comprehend that it is derived from the image of *Something that doesn't happen very often*. Therefore, it is unattainable for EFL learners who is unfamiliar with this idiom to immediately understand that such an idiom is used to describe something which is *very rarely*. Therefore, recognizing the image that the idiom is derived from and the origin of the idiom could

aid in determining the figurative meaning of that specific idiom. As well as, using idioms in context rather than using it in isolation

may also assist EFL learners who are unfamiliar with that idiom to understand and discover the metaphorical meaning.

Linguistically, it is not easy to define idioms. Marlies (1995) defined it as “an expression whose overall figurative meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its parts” (p. 283). Namely, Idiomatic expressions make their meaning by accident and by chance. So, it is essential for college students observed that there is no relation between the idiom and its meaning and that idioms have to be learned by heart. And because idiomatic expressions are considered unavoidable for EFL learners, and it is a fundamental part of the English language lexicon and vocabulary. Therefore, college students need to learn idiomatic expressions and practice how to use them, parallel to native speakers. As well as, they should be familiar with these idioms to immediately understand.

Thus, this study is essential for language teachers because it explains the problematic areas of these English idioms encountered by college students, in order to include idiomatic expressions English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms and in their teaching materials.

Definition of Idioms

The term *idiom* is often used in the literature, but what it refers to varies. idioms are fixed expressions which are characteristically used in a figurative sense and they have arbitrary meanings. According to Larso (1984), idiom is “a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words” (p. 20). As well as, Baker (1992) defined idioms as “frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form, and in the case of idioms, often carry meaning which cannot be deduced from their individual components” (p. 63).

Richards and Schmidt (1990) affirmed that idiom is “an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from separate parts” (p. 246). On the other hand, Alexander (1987) stated that idioms are “multi-word units which have to be learned as a whole, along with associated sociolinguistic, cultural and pragmatics rules of use” (p. 178). So, idioms are fixed in their form, and cannot be changed or varied and the best way to comprehend an idiom is to notice it in the context.

McCarthy and O'Dell (2003) stated that idiom is expression which has a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words, for example, the idiom "*Learning English is a piece of cake as long as you do it with our website.*" means "*something that is easy to do.*", but we do not identify this just by looking at their words. As a result, idiom is "a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2012, p. 870).

Accordingly, idioms should turn out to be an essential part of foreign language acquisition for the non-native speakers who are actually enthusiastic to apply their language skills and knowledge in practice communicating with native speakers.

Idioms and Learning Process

Before explaining what the best way to teach idioms to foreign language students is, the cause why idioms are essential to recognize needs to be concentrated on. Why practicing idioms in the classroom is considered a valuable activity? Why is it necessary for EFL learners to learn and comprehend English idioms? Generally, learning idioms is essential matter in the acquiring process of English language. Because the native speakers use idioms in everyday speech in all the situations, EFL students being in a foreign countries often feel puzzled and upset because they do not understand their conversations. consequently, most idioms are a fundamental aspect of English language learning and give it a bright, conversational and creative feeling because their high frequency in the communication. Therefore, if EFL students want to speak English fluently, they have to learn idioms to develop their communication skills and feel confident talking to native speakers.

In regards to the English teaching and learning in Iraqi context. English language is recognized as the most significant foreign language in Iraq and precollege curriculum includes obligatory English language courses as a school subject. However, Thi-Qar University students speak their native language (Arabic language) at home and during their communications with their friends, peers, classmates, and even instructors. Thus, there are less probabilities to learn English in general and idioms in particular. As observed by the researcher, who is instructor at Thi-Qar University, idiom gain has been an ignored area in the local EFL teaching and learning environment. As well as, the presentation of idioms in the EFL curriculum is disappointing (i.e. idioms are not included into the English language curriculum). In

addition, EFL research into idiom learning and acquisition in Iraq EFL context has not been given sufficient attention. . Idioms are chosen and educated on an arbitrary basis using unplanned teaching methods, so, most of EFL students fail to use and understand idioms. This is certainly because of a traditional highlighting on the gaining of the grammatical system rather than other aspects of linguistic skills, including idiomatic competence.

Learning Idioms Strategies

EFL learners use a different types of methods and techniques for idioms processing (Zhang, 2009: 18). In teaching, Cooper (1999) involves a technique in which EFL learners are hearten to use their experiences in assessing potential answers or solutions to study, observe, comprehend, and resolve problems of idioms on their own. Coryell (2012: 25) stated that EFL learners are able to use an explicatory approach in which they try out different methods and strategies depending on the lucidity/ambiguity, analysis, and knowledge of idioms to conclude the meaning of idiomatic expressions. As said by Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004: 110), Cooper (1999) organized a number of strategies to comprehend idioms and categorize them into two groups: "preparatory" and "guessing". The first group includes three strategies: reiterate or interpret the idiom, ask for information and investigate and explore the idiom. The second group includes four strategies: (1) *using contextual information* to infer the meaning of idioms in this strategy EFL students debate the context in which the idioms is included and create reference to deduce the meaning of the idioms (Cooper, 1999: 246). As observed by both Cooper (1999) and Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004) using contextual information to infer the meaning of idioms is clearly an useful strategy that helps learners in understanding unclear idioms whose meaning cannot be inferred from the individual word meanings. At the end, Cooper (1999) and Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004) assume that EFL students will not recourse to another strategies till they are being unsuccessful to use contextual information to infer the meaning of idioms. (2) *using the literal meaning* in which EFL students should know the metaphorical sense of idioms and they focus on the literal meaning of the idiomatic expressions and use it as a clue to understand the figurative meaning, Cooper (1999: 249). Coryell (2012:26) proposed that using metaphorical relations between literal and figurative meanings are motivated idioms. (3) *using background knowledge*: Palmer and Brooks (2004) indicated that understanding the figurative

meaning of idioms is mostly associated with learner's background knowledge to infer the expression within context. For instance, EFL students may keep in mind what they have learned in classroom during different activities such as dialogues/role plays or they have heard it on TV or in a song or they might have heard their friends using these idiomatic expressions (Cooper, 1999: 250). Coryell (2012: 26) indicated that the use of background knowledge is related with the use of the literal meaning of an idiom to deduce its figurative meaning.

(4) *referring to an L1 idiom to understand L2 idioms*: Cornell (1999, p.6) indicated that L2 learners may depend on their own L1 to support or obstruct their understanding of L2 idioms processing and this is called the "interlingual factor". In (1986) Irujo organized a study in which he pointed out that idioms that have a similar or identical L1 equivalents may help L2 learners in their comprehension of L2 idioms. At the same time, they cause difficulty for L2 learners if L2 idioms have no similar or identical L1 equivalents

During this study, the researcher has been espoused and customized the second group of Cooper's strategies because the guessing strategies guide to the true answers more than the other strategies (Cooper, 1999).

Methodology

The sample

The sample of the present study consists of third-year students at the University of Thi-Qar, College of Education for Humanities, Department of English for the academic year 2020-2021. The number of the sample is 50 students. The reason behind choosing the third-year students lies in the fact that third year students study reading comprehension in the first and second year as well they study listening and speaking in third year. In addition, they are intermediate learners of English, i.e. they have adequate knowledge about idioms and they are not beginners who do not have any idea about idioms.

Test objectives

For testing the hypothesis of this research, the researcher has designed a diagnostic test to examine the students' knowledge of idioms and a strategies guessing test. Fifty students sat the test, some instructions and information about the different strategies which can be used to deduce the meaning of the unfamiliar idioms, i.e.

contextual information, the literal meaning of the idiom, background knowledge as well as *LI linguistic knowledge* in order to make them familiar with these strategies. The important of using test in educational program is to give us (or teacher of English) information to evaluate EFL Iraqi students' competence in using and understanding idiomatic expressions. There are two majors uses of language test: the first use of the test represents as a source of information for making decisions within the text of education programs; and the second one as indicators of learners' abilities\ or attributes.

Test Description

The test is intended to assess students' performance and diagnose the problematic spots and areas of weakness in order to help learners and instructors to pinpoint these area, focus on them in order to help students to control them. Hence, the present test aims at indicating specifically the particular areas where deficiencies lie. The results are assumed to help language students and teachers to overcome the difficulties or adopt more creative techniques for teaching and learning idiomatic expressions. For choosing idioms which is suitable for the strategies guessing test, the researchers has designed an idiom familiarity test. Test is composed of 20 items, included a blend of different semantic categories of idioms. In this test, students are asked to choose the correct meaning of the idiom from four choices presented under each sentence as well as they are asked about what strategy they are relied on in their choosing the answers. The idioms, which have used in the test, have unobvious meaning because an obvious idioms don't represent a challenge so there is no need for more attention from students. Idioms used in the test are chosen from dictionaries of idioms from Oxford Dictionary of Idioms by Siefring (2004), A Book of English Idioms by Collins (1961) and Idioms & Phrases Questions & Answers | English For ... – Byjus <https://byjus.com/govt-exams/idioms-phrases-question-answer/>.

Strategies Guessing test

During the process of understanding idioms, students use particular strategies which they rely on in their interpretation of idioms (Cooper, 1999: 244). In this study, a test has been used to distinguish the strategies Iraqi EFL students adopted to infer the meaning of unfamiliar idioms.

Data Analysis

A percentage is statistically used in this part of the study which is measure the ratio of different correct/ or incorrect answers to total numbers of overall student's answers and show the frequency rates of errors which are committed by the learners of English in each item and as well reveal what strategies are used as follows:

Table (1)
Correct, Incorrect and Left out Answers

No. of Item	Correct Responses	Incorrect Responses	Left out Response	Percentage of Correct Responses
1	10	30	10	20%
2	22	24	4	44%
3	15	28	7	30%
4	31	16	3	62%
5	13	25	12	26%
6	8	17	25	16%
7	23	20	7	46%
8	20	22	8	40%
9	17	24	9	34%
10	9	30	11	18%
11	8	40	2	16%
12	29	21	0	58%
13	31	15	4	62%
14	32	18	0	64%
15	19	31	0	38%
16	30	15	5	60%
17	20	30	0	40%
18	36	14	0	72%
19	32	14	4	64%
20	29	21	0	58%
Average				43%

Table (1) confirms that the total number of learners' correct answers is (434) which constitutes 43% and the total number of learners' incorrect answers is (455) which constitutes 57%. From the table, we found that there are statistically significant differences between the correct and incorrect answers. This indicates the performance of Iraqi EFL learners is weak and they face difficulties in using and understanding idiomatic expressions in all areas of current test. Iraqi learners are inefficient and make various types of errors. Learners of English are puzzled in using idioms. Undistinguishing and uncontrolled are frequently occur in the areas of the test. See figure (1)

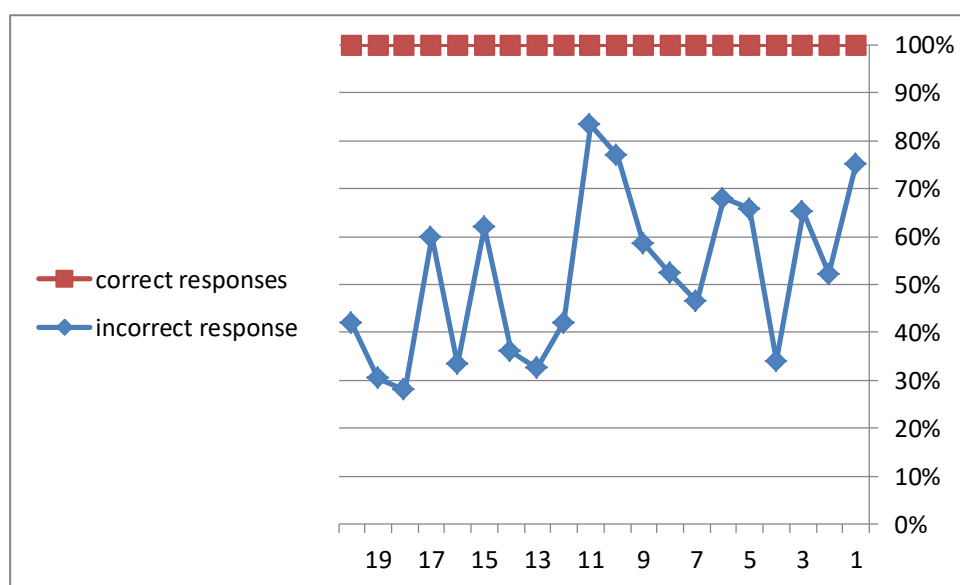


Figure (1) The Frequency of the Errors used by Subjects in the Test

Calculating the Difficulty Level and Discrimination Power

The findings and interpretations of the results of the test in concern with the difficulty level and discrimination power of the items of the test are exhibited in the table (2) given below. Difficulty level or facility value refers to the extent of difficulty of an item. Discrimination power shows the discrimination between high and low students, (Heaton, 1988:178-79). This interpretation is useful to identify those items which were answered correctly by the more able students taking the test, and badly by the less able students.

Table (2)
Difficulty Level and Discrimination Power on each Item in the Test

no. of Item	Correct Responses	Incorrect Responses	Difficulty Level	Discrimination Power
1	10	40	20%	0.32
2	22	28	44%	0.36
3	15	35	30%	0.52
4	31	19	62%	0.52
5	13	37	26%	0.44
6	8	42	16%	0.32
7	23	27	46%	0.68
8	20	30	40%	0.32
9	17	33	34%	0.36
10	9	41	18%	0.32
11	8	42	16%	0.32
12	29	21	58%	0.68
13	31	19	62%	0.32
14	32	18	64%	0.48
15	19	31	38%	0.68
16	30	20	60%	0.6
17	20	30	40%	0.4
18	36	14	72%	0.32
19	32	18	64%	0.48
20	29	21	58%	0.44
Average			43%	44%

Almost half of the item have the difficulty level between (0.50) and (0.60), which is considered highly preferable. Eight items have acceptable difficulty and three are very difficult. The difficulty index is (0.43). the discrimination power is (0.44).

Independent Sample t-Test

The following table (3) exhibit the testees' mean score, the theoretical mean, stander deviation, in addition to the calculated and the tabulated values:

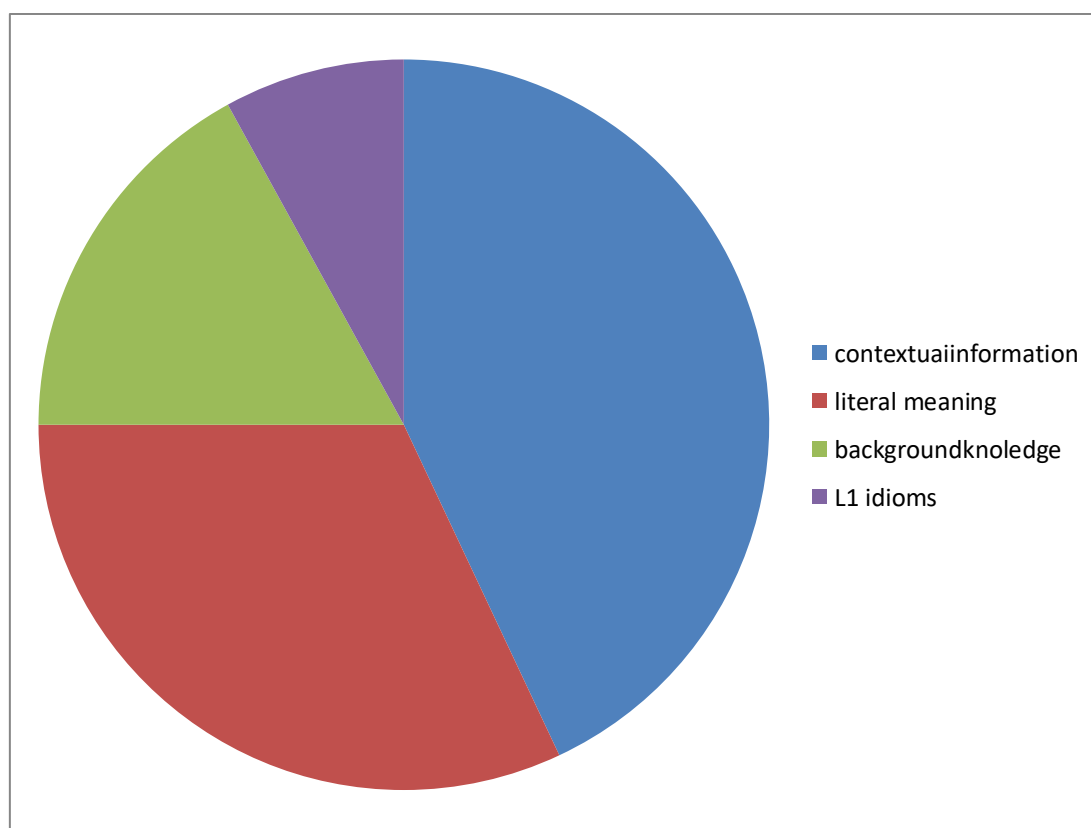
Table (3)
Independent Sample t-Test

No. of the sample	Mean of the sample	Theoretical mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	Calculated t- value	Tabulated value	Degree of freedom	Mean differences
50	9.32	10	4.541	0.636	0.612	2.000	49	0.68

Table (3) shows the statistic of the test where the calculated t- value is smaller than the tabulated value at the (0.05) level and degree of freedom (49). The calculated t- value is (0.612) and the tabulated is (2.000). the testees' performance is weak since the theoretical mean (10) is bigger than the mean of the sample (9.32).

At the end, the strategy which is used much more than the other strategies is *contextual information*. It is obtained the highest percentage (0.42), that means 21 students out of 50 students rely on this strategy to deduce the meanings of the strange idioms (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Frequency of the Strategies used by Students in the Strategies Guessing test



Conclusion:

According to the subjects' errors analysis, the findings reveal that:

1. The unsatisfactory level of Iraqi third- year university students in concern with idiomatic expressions.
2. The students demonstrate a weak performance in the idioms familiarity test, the weak and unsatisfactory results of the students on the test because the lack of idioms subject in the curriculum of Departments of English.
3. The most effective strategy which is used by the highest percentage of the students is *contextual information* (42 %). In fact, the context has a significant role in the interpretation the meaning of idioms

In short, Iraqi EFL learners are unable to comprehend the idiomatic expressions and have many difficulties in using idioms. This comes from poor restricted techniques, poor mechanical activities in their textbook. As a result of that, we advise learners of English to focus/ answer some exercises in different sources and read more authentic texts contain different types of idioms. Likewise; teachers of English should encourage their students to read more about idioms as well as to use various techniques to improve their efficiency such as background knowledge, context, L1 equivalents, etc... It has proved to be efficient and appropriate to teach idioms.

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