

## Idioms Comprehension among Libyan undergraduate English students at Sirt university

Amal Salah Sase \*

Department of English Language, Faculty of Education, Sirte University, Sirte, Libya.  
[amel.salah@su.edu.ly](mailto:amel.salah@su.edu.ly)

فهم التعبيرات الاصطلاحية لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية الليبيين في جامعة سرت

أمل صالح ساسي \*

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية، جامعة سرت، سرت، ليبيا.

تاريخ النشر: 2025-10-01

تاريخ القبول: 2025-09-17

تاريخ الاستلام: 2025-08-15

### الملخص:

تعد التعبيرات الاصطلاحية ومكوّنًا مهمًا في اللغة جزءًا لا يتجزأ منها، حيث يجد غير الناطقين بها صعوبة في استخدامها، بينما يستطيع الناطقون بها استخدامها بشكل صحيح. هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى اختبار مدى قدرة الطلاب الليبيين في جامعة سرت على فهم التعبيرات الاصطلاحية بدقة. اعتمدت هذه الدراسة طريقة كمية: استبيان مانتيل (2004) كأداة مستخدمة في هذه الدراسة. وحيث شملت هذه الدراسة 30 طالبًا ليبيا جامعيًا في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة سرت. أظهرت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن المشاركين لم يجيبوا بشكل كافٍ على أسئلة الاختبار المتعلقة بالتعبير الاصطلاحية، بمعنى آخر، لم يتمكن المشاركون من فهم معاني التعبيرات الاصطلاحية بشكل صحيح.

**الكلمات الدالة:** التعبيرات الاصطلاحية ، فهم للتعبير الاصطلاحية ، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

### Abstract

Idioms are an integral and important component in the language, nonnatives suffer and struggle in their use of idioms, while natives can use idioms properly. This study purposed to examine whether Libyan undergraduate students are able to understand idiom accurately or not. This study employed quantitative method: Mäntylä's (2004) questionnaire adopted as an instrument used for this study. This study involved 30 Libyan undergraduate Students at English department in Sirt university. Data analysis was done using SPSS for quantitative data. The result of this study found out that the respondents replied the idioms' task insufficiently. In other words, the participants could not understand the meanings of idioms by proper sense .

**Keywords:** Idioms , comprehensive of idioms , EFL learners.

## **Introduction**

Idioms have increased a lot of attention in the standard language research as a result of their irregular nature. It usually consists of many words do not single units. In addition, to define or describe idioms in exact terms may be difficult. For instance, Richards and Schmidt (2002: 246) stated an idiom, as "An expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts." For example, the meaning of the idiom "a bird told me that", which means that "I have known this piece of information in my own way", do not supposed literally as if the bird was the agent. Thus, it does not give any sense, if translated lexemes separately "bird; tell". Whereas, it may hold a literal meaning if state as a phrase, and it gets used in a figurative way. In other hand, it may hold a correlation between the components of idioms and their idiomatic or figurative meaning (Al-Haddad, 1994:217). These reasons which may affect the way of acquiring the foreign language, including idioms which researchers have discussed it for ages.

## **Problem statement**

Literature proposes a variety of strategies which language learners usually employ to understand and comprehend the meanings of idioms (e.g. Fernando, C. (1994). Therefore, this study would examine how they idioms' can be comprehension and interpretation among students. idiom comprehension has been a debatable subject within the field of SLA which played important role (see e.g. Sadiq, S. (2008). Therefore, this study is expected to contribute practically and theoretically to the field of second language acquisition. Practically, it will contribute to understanding how undergraduate Libyan students comprehend idioms and the factors which may affect such comprehension. Idioms contribute to the fluency of speaking English, and thus understanding the factors of comprehending idioms will help teachers and pedagogists to develop this important area of vocabulary. Theoretically, this study will add to the literature of the second language acquisition, and it is hoped to be reference for future students, who are apt to investigate these areas of vocabulary and second language acquisition.

## **Objective of study**

To examine how Libyan undergraduate students understand idiom accurately

## **Question of study**

How accurate is the Libyan undergraduate student's comprehension of idioms?

## **Previous studies**

Idioms are a stimulating aspect of languages. An idiom meaning is not a total of its literal parts and it often does not have parallels in other languages. Hence, idioms may very problematic thing for foreign language learners to understand or use. One reason that makes learning idioms more challenging is the inability to expect their meanings out of their lemmas or separate components, or even out of their syntactic structure. This challenge of comprehend idioms resulted in little attention and research in this area of idioms Al-Khawaldeh, N., Jaradat, A., Al-Momani, H., & Bani-Khair, B. (2016). Though idioms are unquestionably important, they are tough to define or to have an agreed-on definition. Idioms are always disputable (Mäntylä 2004).

Researchers have conversed idioms from different views; some of them discussed idioms in terms of structure, whereas, others studied idioms in terms of meaning Irujo (1986), for instance, studied the effect of the First language of Venezuelan advanced students on producing and comprehending the English idioms. Laufer (2000) conducted a study on Hebrew undergraduate

students to investigate the degree of avoidance of idioms in relation to their similarity with the native tongue. Some other studies examined idioms among nonnative speakers of English (e.g. Lundblom, E. E., & Woods, J. J. (2012). In Arabic context, few studies were conducted to investigate idioms. For example, Abdullah and Jackson (1998) investigated the language transfer effect on acquiring and understanding idioms, among Syrian undergraduate students.

Even though the recently numerous research on L2 vocabulary, it seems that the issue of L2 idiom understandable has not received the due attention. For instance, it was found that the knowledge of second learners about standard language is less than their knowledge of L2 terminology in general (Steinel et al., 2007), and they vary from first language speakers to a significant level (e.g. Mäntylä, 2005). Likewise, idioms are one of the challenges which non-native learners face in perceiving English; they usually have issues when they cannot understand what native speakers mean by a mass of words. In spite of such difficulty of idioms for nonnative speakers of English, most studies regarding idioms' understandable focused on native speakers

Few studies investigated the idioms among students. Some studies were conducted on undergraduate students, but from the perspective of language transfer (e.g. Mahmoud, 2013). Though, little is known about studies which investigate the characteristics of idioms and their role in acquiring and understanding idioms. Furthermore, there is essential to study idioms from perspective of L2 the studies on English idioms have focused on how first language speakers comprehend them. Idioms represent beliefs of culture, social conventions, and customs. They also constitute a central component of the language. As Yağiz and Izadpanah (2013) explained, idioms are a main item of native-like interaction conversation; they permit a language learner to understand views, feelings of the speakers of the English language. Thus, learning and knowing idioms in the L2 assist to increase lexical knowledge beside comprehend values of cultural, knowledges, and customs of the language. Due to the importance of learning idioms, it is necessary to build second language learners' knowledge of idioms in a systematic way. Zarei, A. and Pour, V. (2013)

## **Methodology**

quantitative research design was employed in this study. A questionnaire as a quantitative tool was used in the study. A quantitative approach can be suitable for this research as the data are showed in figures. It is recognized that a quantitative design depends on statistical data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Thirty (30) Libyan undergraduate students from Sirt university, and who are studying English at education department, constitute the sampling of the current research. To control for the proficiency level, only students who are in semester 7 and 8 would be selected. Thus, sampling in this research is purposive one. Purposive sampling, refers to the deliberate selection of place, people, or events for the vital data they can give that cannot be gotten as well from other choices (Teddlie, C. and Yu, F. (2007). Purposive sampling includes sampling to reach characterizes or comparability, sampling special or abnormal cases, serial sampling, and sampling using numerous purposive systems., an idiom questionnaire adapted from the Mäntylä's (2004) questionnaire, which was focus with the knowledge of idioms, would constitute the instrument of the study. SPSS would be used to analyze the questionnaire statistically

## **Findings**

### **Comprehensibility of Idioms**

The current study was to examine how English Libyan undergraduate understand the meanings of English idioms. To address such an objective, a 36- item- questionnaire was used, whereby the

participants were asked to select accurate meanings for 36 idioms, and for some idioms show one or two correct answers subsequently there were idioms with several meanings. In this section of the study, the participants were assumed one point for each accurate answer. Then, each subject's total score was calculated (with the maximum being 56 points). To measure central tendency, mean was used.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
VAR00002	30	15.00	23.00	23.1200	3.13324	-.162	.364
Valid N (listwise)	30					-.368	.733

As seen from the table, the data or the scores are normally distributed since the skewness and kurtosis ( -.162, .364, respectively) values fall between -2 and +2. However, as seen from table, students on average did poorly (M= 23.00, SD= 3.13) in answering the idioms' questionnaire. In addition, the maximum score was 23 out of 56, and the minimum score was 15 out of 56. This conveys poor performance among Libyan undergraduate language learners. This is in line with the literature that showed that native and nonnative speakers of English face problems in understanding idioms. For example, Hussein, Khanji, and Makhzoomy (2000) found that Saudi students did very poorly in understanding idioms. Similarly, Mantyla (2004) found that idioms were fairly difficult for the Finnish subjects in his study. The findings are similar with literature in general (e.g. Abdullah & Jackson, 1998; Bulut & Çelik-Yazici, 2004; Cakir, 2011; Irujo, 1986).

As explained above, this study revealed that the Libyan respondents did poorly in the idioms' task. The major finding was that L1 made a negative effect on students' comprehension of the idioms in case the idiom does not have an equivalent in the student's L1. However, L1 was found to have positive effect if the idioms have an equal in the student's L1.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Idioms occur in oral as well as written language daily. They also color the language and make it sound natural. The study presented that the Libyan representers did poorly in the idioms' task. Conversely, the respondent's inability to understand the meanings of idioms correctly. This reflects the poor performance among Libyan language learners, which is due to the hard nature of idioms. This is in line with the literature that showed that native and nonnative speakers of English face problems in understanding idioms. the students' inability to comprehend idioms can be ascribed to their lack of pragmatic competence. Language users. Generally, may reveal grammatical competence, whereas they lack the ability to use language properly, which is pragmatic competence. Idioms are, in nature, very complex because they mostly have a literal meaning as well as figurative meaning. This makes them so difficult to be understood.

Zarei, A. and Pour, V. (2013) revealed those Arab learners of English face difficulties in understanding English idioms due to three main reasons. First, the grammatical and semantic nature of idioms, which cause difficulty for both natives as well as nonnatives. They, thus, propose learning idioms as chunks rather than in terms of their constituent parts. Second, Arab EFL learners mostly avoid using English idioms, and prefer using long words, usually of Latin origin which isolate them as foreigners. Third, idioms are related to culture. Therefore acquiring idioms requires understanding culture, as well.

Moreover, metaphor city varies in terms of degree from one metaphor to another; idioms may also differ in form and convey numerous meanings. All these factors make idioms challenging for L2 learners. Nevertheless, due to the importance of idioms as integral part of the language, L2 learners should attempt to overcome such problems. Without understanding of idioms, L2 users may encounter difficulty in terms of language proficiency.

According to the result of this study, it is suggested that teachers should include idioms and explain them while the teaching at classroom. For upcoming studies should examine the relationship between proficiency level and idioms' comprehension scores. It is also recommended that future studies cover other variable to be examine such as age or motivation among students. The research also could be distributed on a larger size sampling. It is additional suggested that other methodologies could be designed in doing similar studies. For instance, including loud-out procedures could assist to comprehend how learners perceive the trouble in understanding idioms.

## References

- Abdullah, K., & Jackson, H. (1998). Idioms and the Language Learner: Contrasting English and Syrian Arabic. *Languages in Contrast*, 1, 83-107.
- Al-Haddad,. K. (1994). Investigating Difficulties Faced by Advanced Iraqi Students of
- Al-Khawaldeh, N., Jaradat, A., Al-Momani, H., & Bani-Khair, B. (2016). Figurative idiomatic language: Strategies and difficulties of understanding English idioms. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(6), 119-133.
- Bulut, T., & Çelik-Yazıcı, İ. (2004). Idiom processing in L2: Through rose-colored glasses. *The Reading Matrix*, 4(2), 105-116. 57-88 English in Understanding and Using English Idioms. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, College
- Hussein, R., Khanji, R., & Makhzoumi, K. (2000). Idioms: Transfer or what? .*Language and TranslationJournal*,12,23-34,KingSaudUniversit
- Irujo, S. (1986). A piece of cake:learning and teaching idioms. *ELT journal*, 40(3), 236-242
- Laufer, B. (2000). Avoidance of idioms in a second language: The effect of L1- L2 similarity. *Studia Linguistica* 54, 186-196.
- Lundblom, E. E., & Woods, J. J. (2012). Working in the classroom: Improving idiom comprehension through classwide peer tutoring. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 33(4), 202-219.
- Mahmoud, M. M. A. (2013). Investigating Some Lexical Problems in English- Arabic Translation
- Mäntylä, K. (2004). Idioms and language users: The effect of the characteristics of idioms on their recognition and interpretation by native and non-native speakers of English [online]. University of Jyväskylä (2016) of Arts, University of Baghdad.
- Fernando, C. (1994). *Idioms and Idiomacity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, C. J., & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Longman dictionary of language teaching & applied linguistics*. London: Pearson Education
- Sadiq, S. (2008). *Some Semantic, Stylistic and Cultural Problems of Translation*. Sayyad

- Steinel, M. P., Hulstijn, J., & Steinel, W. (2007). Second language idiom learning in a paired associate paradigm. Effects of direction of learning, direction of testing, Idiom Imageability and Idiom Transparency. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 29, 449-484
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Teddlie, C. and Yu, F. (2007) Mixed Methods Sampling: A Typology with Examples. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1, 77-100. *Translation Journal (STJ)*, I: 37 – 51.
- Zarei, A. and Pour, V. (2013). Language learning strategies as predictors of L2 idioms comprehension. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*, 4(2), 330-313.