



STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN INTERPRETING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract: *Idiomatic expressions are an essential part of natural language use and play a significant role in effective communication. However, learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) often experience considerable difficulties when interpreting idiomatic expressions due to their figurative meanings and cultural references. This study investigates the main challenges students face when understanding idioms and explores the factors that influence idiom comprehension. The research employed a mixed-method approach including questionnaires, comprehension tests, and classroom observations. Forty university students participated in the study. The results show that students encounter difficulties mainly because of limited cultural knowledge, lack of contextual understanding, and reliance on literal interpretation. The findings also indicate that exposure to authentic language input and contextual learning strategies can significantly improve idiom comprehension. The study suggests that teachers should incorporate idioms more systematically into language instruction and provide learners with contextualized learning opportunities.*

Keywords: *idiomatic expressions, idiom comprehension, EFL learners, figurative language, language difficulties*

Introduction

Language learning involves more than mastering grammar and vocabulary; it also requires understanding figurative language. Idiomatic expressions represent a unique aspect of language that reflects cultural knowledge and native speaker communication patterns. Idioms are commonly used in everyday conversations, literature, media, and informal communication.



An idiom is typically defined as a phrase whose meaning cannot be understood from the literal meanings of its individual components. For example, expressions such as “*kick the bucket*,” “*hit the nail on the head*,” or “*under the weather*” cannot be interpreted literally. Instead, their meanings must be understood figuratively.

For students learning English as a foreign language, interpreting idioms is often challenging. Even learners with a relatively high level of language proficiency may struggle to understand idiomatic expressions. This difficulty occurs because idioms frequently rely on cultural knowledge, contextual clues, and figurative thinking.

Another challenge arises from the fact that many students tend to interpret language literally. When encountering an unfamiliar idiom, learners may attempt to translate each word individually, which can lead to misunderstanding or confusion. As a result, students may avoid using idioms in communication or fail to understand them in authentic texts.

In modern language education, communicative competence is considered an essential goal of language learning. This competence includes not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to understand figurative language such as idioms, metaphors, and phrasal expressions.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulties students face when interpreting idiomatic expressions and to identify the main factors that contribute to these difficulties.

The research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main difficulties students encounter when interpreting idiomatic expressions?
2. What factors influence students’ comprehension of idioms?
3. How can language instruction help students overcome these difficulties?

Literature Review



Idiomatic expressions have been widely discussed in the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition. Researchers generally agree that idioms represent a challenging area for language learners due to their figurative and culturally specific meanings.

Scholars explain that idioms differ from regular vocabulary because their meanings cannot always be predicted from the meanings of the individual words. This feature often causes difficulties for learners who rely on literal interpretation.

Several studies suggest that cultural knowledge plays an important role in idiom comprehension. Many idioms originate from historical events, cultural practices, or social traditions. Without understanding these cultural contexts, learners may find it difficult to interpret the intended meaning of an idiom.

Another factor that affects idiom comprehension is exposure to authentic language input. Students who frequently encounter idioms in real-life communication, media, and literature tend to develop better understanding of figurative expressions.

Researchers also emphasize the role of context in interpreting idioms. When idioms appear within meaningful sentences or narratives, learners can use contextual clues to infer their meanings. However, when idioms are presented in isolation, comprehension becomes more difficult.

Psycholinguistic research has also examined how learners process idioms cognitively. Some studies indicate that advanced learners may process idioms as single lexical units, while beginners often attempt to analyze each word separately.

Although many studies have explored idiom comprehension, students continue to face challenges in understanding figurative language. Therefore, further investigation is needed to identify the specific difficulties learners experience and to develop effective teaching strategies.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a mixed-method research design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The goal was to examine students' difficulties in



interpreting idiomatic expressions and to analyze possible causes of these difficulties.

Participants

The participants were 40 undergraduate students studying English at a university. Their English proficiency level ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate.

The students were selected because they had already studied English for several years but still experienced challenges when encountering idiomatic expressions.

Data Collection Instruments

Three main instruments were used in this research:

1. Questionnaire

A questionnaire was distributed to collect information about students' experiences with idioms and their perceptions of difficulty in interpreting them.

2. Idiom Comprehension Test

Students were given a test containing several common English idioms used in short sentences. The aim of the test was to measure their ability to interpret idiomatic meanings.

3. Classroom Observation

Classroom observation was conducted to analyze how students react when they encounter idioms during language lessons and discussions.

Procedure

The research was conducted over a period of four weeks. During the first week, students completed the questionnaire and the initial idiom comprehension test.

In the following weeks, classroom observations were carried out while students participated in language activities that included idiomatic expressions.

At the end of the study, students completed a final comprehension task to evaluate their progress and identify remaining difficulties.

Results



The results of the study revealed several significant difficulties experienced by students when interpreting idiomatic expressions.

First, many students tended to interpret idioms literally. For example, when encountering expressions such as “*spill the beans*,” some students attempted to understand the phrase based on the literal meanings of the words rather than recognizing its figurative meaning.

Second, the lack of cultural knowledge was identified as an important factor affecting comprehension. Students often reported that they did not understand the cultural references associated with certain idioms.

Third, limited exposure to authentic English input also contributed to students’ difficulties. Many participants indicated that they rarely encountered idioms in their textbooks or classroom materials.

The comprehension test results showed that students performed better when idioms were presented within clear contexts. When idioms appeared in isolated sentences without contextual clues, the accuracy of interpretation decreased significantly.

Classroom observations also revealed that students were more confident when discussing idioms in group activities. Collaborative learning allowed them to share ideas and interpret meanings more effectively.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that idiomatic expressions remain a challenging aspect of language learning for many EFL students.

One of the major difficulties identified in this research is the tendency of learners to interpret idioms literally. This result supports previous studies suggesting that learners often rely on word-by-word analysis when encountering unfamiliar expressions.

The study also highlights the importance of cultural knowledge in idiom comprehension. Since many idioms are rooted in cultural experiences, students may struggle to interpret them without sufficient cultural background.



Another important finding is the role of context in facilitating comprehension. When idioms were presented within meaningful contexts, students were able to use surrounding information to infer their meanings.

The results also suggest that collaborative and communicative learning activities can support students in interpreting idioms. Group discussions and interactive tasks allow learners to explore multiple interpretations and develop a deeper understanding of figurative language.

These findings indicate that language teachers should incorporate idioms more actively into classroom instruction and provide learners with opportunities to encounter idiomatic expressions in authentic contexts.

Conclusion

Idiomatic expressions are an important component of natural language communication, yet they present considerable challenges for EFL learners. This study investigated students' difficulties in interpreting idiomatic expressions and identified several factors contributing to these challenges.

The findings show that literal interpretation, limited cultural knowledge, and lack of exposure to authentic language input are among the main difficulties students face when understanding idioms.

To address these challenges, language teachers should emphasize contextual learning, cultural awareness, and communicative activities when teaching idiomatic expressions. Integrating idioms into authentic language materials can help students develop better comprehension and improve their communicative competence.

Future research may explore the use of digital resources, multimedia materials, and corpus-based approaches to enhance idiom learning in EFL contexts.

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