

An Investigation of Some Difficulties in Idioms Encountered by Saudi Learners of English

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Abstract: *The present study investigated the ability of Saudi English major female students to recognize and comprehend English idioms in certain contexts. Subjects were 60 senior Saudi female learners of English, Taibah University. Their recognition and comprehension of English pure idioms were tested with translation and multiple-choice tests. The results demonstrate that context plays an essential role in facilitating the processes of recognizing and comprehending English idioms effectively. Idioms that were more easily recognized and comprehended were those which were frequently used, transparent and which had simple vocabulary and structure.*

Introduction

Idioms are the colourful side of languages. They help people to emphasize and make their observations, judgments and explanations lively and interesting. They also enable people to communicate a great deal of information in just a few words. Idiomatic usage is not peripheral and of trivial importance, but rather is very common in English language which makes it difficult to speak or write without using them. English foreign language (EFL) learners face idioms everywhere. They encounter them when they speak with native speakers, watch television, listen to the radio, and read newspapers, magazine, textbooks, poetry, novels, short stories and plays. The common use of idioms in everyday spoken and written communication has been well documented (Pollio, Barlow, Fine & Pollio, 1977; Popiel & McRae, 1988; Lazar, Warr – Leeper, Nicholson & Johnson, 1989; Nippold, 1991; Milosky, 1994; Makkai, Boatner & Gates, 1995). For instance according to a study conducted by Lazar et al. (1989), "approximately 6.7% of the sentences in third- to eighth-grade reading materials used idioms" quoted in Bulut (2004:105). Pollio et al. (1977) find that idiomatic expressions arise every 3-4 minutes in conversation. Kreuz and Roberts (1993) report that idioms account for 18%-20% of the figurative language in contemporary American literature, quoted in Qualls et al. (2003:70).

Howarth (1998:28) defines "a pure idiom" as "a unitary meaning that cannot be derived from the meanings of its components". Irujo (1984:38) declares that the most widely agreed-upon definition of an idiom is what states that "an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be derived from its constituent parts" (Stein & Su, 1980:444). Idioms have conventionalized meanings, agreed upon by speakers of the language, which usually cannot be

figured out if they are not known (Irujo, 1984:42). For example, the knowledge of the meaning of words *to kick the bucket* will not provide any clue at all to the idiomatic meaning of it which is "to die or pass away".

Idioms seem to represent a stumbling block for most of the foreign language learners (FLLs) because of their conventionalized nature and frequent usage within any one language (Adkins, 1972; Lodge & Leach, 1975; Irujo, 1984, 1986b; Hajjaj & Kharma, 1989; Awwad, 1990; Alharthy, 1997; Cooper, 1999; Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Hussein et al., 2000; Liontas, 2002a; Mahmoud, 2002; Aldoubi, 2003; Eltahir, 2003; Nippold, 2003; Ghazala, 2004).

It is the case that the main problems that idiomatic expressions pose in learning or using them relate to several main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly (Adkins, 1972; Baker, 1992; Alharthy, 1997; Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Eltahir, 2003; Abu-Ssaydah, 2004), the appropriate use of idioms as they vary in formality from slang to colloquialisms (Sugano, 1981; Seidl, 1983; Irujo, 1984, 1986b; Levorato, 1993), in their degree of fixedness (Sugano, 1981; Seidl, 1983; Irujo, 1984, 1986b; Alexander, 1987; Reagan, 1987; Baker, 1992; Ifill, 2002; Colin, 2006) and the effect of the mother tongue (Irujo, 1984, 1986a; Awwad, 1990; Hussein et al., 2000; Liontas, 2002a; Mahmoud, 2002; Aldoubi, 2003). Learners of English language always encounter these problems in learning or using English idioms which results in misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Saudi learners are among the Arab learners who face the same difficulty too, as Alharthy (1997) and Aldoubi (2003) state. One of the two researchers of this study also has realized from her experience in teaching English to the Saudi female learners at Girls' College of Education, Taibah University in Almadinah Almunawwarah, that most of her subjects (Ss) encounter difficulties in recognizing, comprehending and producing English idioms.

Difficulties Involved in Learning English Idioms

Foreign language learners often encounter difficulties in acquiring or learning a foreign language (FL). Idioms are considered to be one of the language's features which constitute a special difficulty for all learners (Adkins, 1972; Lodge & Leach, 1975; Irujo, 1984, 1986a, 1986b; Hajjaj & Kharma, 1989; Awwad, 1990; Cooper, 1999; Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Hussein et al., 2000; Liontas, 2002a; Mahmoud, 2002; Aldoubi, 2003; Liu, 2003; Nippold, 2003; Ghazala, 2004; Colin, 2006; Andreou & Galantomos, 2007). There are several factors which make idioms difficult to learn in a second language (L2) or FL. These factors are as follows:

Nature of idioms

Idioms have a conventionalized meaning which cannot be found out from its constituent parts. For example, *spill the beans* has nothing to do with spill or beans in its literal sense. Most idioms also have literal counterparts, which make them even harder to learn. A native speaker quickly realizes which meaning is intended, while the L2 learner is left trying to find out the intended meaning.

The native speaker of English acquires his/ her idioms naturally, but a foreign language learner (FLL) has to learn them during the course of learning the FL in question- English, for the purpose of this research (Irujo, 1986b; Hajjaj & Kharma, 1989; Cooper, 1999). Therefore, it would be useful for EFL learners to start learning English idioms in a meaningful context to enable them easily realize and understand the intended meanings of these idioms.

Exposure to idioms

Idioms are often seemed to be avoided in speech addressed to L2 learners or FLLs in order to facilitate the processes of communication and learning. Therefore, native speakers or EFL teachers often tend to use simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary when addressing L2 learners or FLLs (Henzl, 1973; Kellerman, 1977 quoted in Irujo, 1986b:237; Mahmoud, 2002; Bulut, 2004). It is obvious that idioms are frequently used in newspapers, magazines, movies and television shows. However, television shows and movies do not provide the kind of interaction which is necessary for learning a language; input without interaction is not sufficient for language acquisition (Long, 1981). Thus, learners' exposure to idioms in non interactive situations miss the opportunity to identify the meaning and receive sufficient feedback, which are very essential for the language acquisition. Therefore, it is important for EFL teachers to introduce idioms to their students in an interactive way and teach them how and when to use these idioms appropriately.

Insufficient coverage of idioms in language materials

There are many second-language materials which either ignore idioms entirely or address them in a non-systematic and non-contextualized way. Many written academic or scientific discourse are usually not idiomatic. Some materials which contain some idioms are intuition based without observing the importance and frequency of idioms. Concerning EFL teachers, some of them tend to translate or explain idioms briefly when they come across them in reading materials or textbook dialogues without providing sufficient exercises or other aids of learning. Moreover, there are some EFL teachers who themselves do not know many English idioms nor their origins and usage (Irujo, 1986b; Mola, 1993; Cooper, 1999; Mahmoud, 2002; Aldoubi, 2003; Liu, 2003; Bulut, 2004; Andreou & Galantomos, 2007). Therefore, it is advisable for textbook writers and EFL teachers to specially focus on the teaching of idioms. They have to introduce idioms to the students in a systematic, rigorous and effective manner. They should provide more accurate descriptions of the meanings of idioms as well as their appropriate usage.

A meaningful context with interesting exercises and useful aids are of great help for better understanding and communication. Teaching idioms should be considered as one of the main goals of an English program that aspires to achieve communicative competence for the learners.

Degree of fixedness of idioms

The degree of fixedness of idioms constitutes a special difficulty for L2 learners or FLLs. It is the case that idioms are not entirely impervious to syntactic and morphological operations. However, idioms vary in their degree of fixedness. They can range from completely frozen to very flexible ones (Sugano, 1981; Seidl, 1983; Irujo, 1984, 1986b; Alexander, 1987; Reagan, 1987; Baker, 1992; Ifill, 2002; Colin, 2006). Parts of some idioms can be quantified, modified, or omitted, lexical elements can be inserted at various points, clauses can be embedded in idiomatic phrases, and so forth (Flores d'Arcais, 1993:80). While some idioms can accept variation easily (*lay down the law, the law was laid down*); others cannot (*kick the bucket or take it easy*). Therefore, it is important for EFL learners to know to what degree the syntax of a particular idiom is frozen, and what kind of variation it may permit and still retain its idiomatic meaning and nature. Moreover, EFL learners should consider that verbs in verbal idioms must be put into their correct tenses, and pronouns must agree with their antecedents.

Appropriateness of using idioms

Even when EFL learners succeed in acquiring the meanings of some English idioms, they still find it difficult to use them appropriately (Hahn, 1973; Sugano, 1981; Seidl, 1983; Irujo, 1984, 1986b; Levorato, 1993). English foreign language learners may face idioms in every sphere of human life and communication. Idioms can be found in formal situations, *run the risk*, in slang speech, *you got it*, and in colloquial conversations too, *kick the bucket*. Thus, it is advisable for EFL learners to learn not only the meanings of English idioms but also their appropriate usage. Moreover, it is important for the textbook writers and EFL teachers to introduce idioms to their students in different contexts to help them overcome this problem effectively.

Influence of L1 on L2

The influence of first language (L1) on L2 poses a burden for L2 learners or FLLs. If learners try to rely on their L1 to help them use idioms in their L2 or FL, they will be successful in a very few instances only. This strategy may be useful with identical idioms in both languages. In the case of similar or dissimilar idioms between L1 and L2, this strategy may produce an incorrect form or use of idioms (Irujo, 1984, 1986a; Cooper, 1999; Hussein et al., 2000; Huang, 2001; Liantas, 2002a; Mahmoud, 2002; Aldoubi, 2003). Therefore, a systematic study of similarities and differences of idioms in both languages is necessary in helping learners realize the slight differences between L1 and L2 idioms to avoid interference, and manage in utilizing the positive transfer.

Lack of cultural and historical awareness of English idioms

The lack of historical and cultural knowledge of English idioms poses a special difficulty for EFL learners to recognize, comprehend and produce idioms effectively (Awwad, 1990; Huang, 2001; Qualls & Harris, 1999 quoted in

Qualls et al., 2003:75; Liontas, 2002a; Mahmoud, 2002; Homeidi, 2004; Colin, 2006). Hajjaj and Kharma (1989:73) discover that Arab learners encounter difficulty in using English idioms because the great majority of the idioms are cultural specificity, for example, *put the cart before the horse*. Awwad (1990:58-59) states that cultural differences among languages constitute a great difficulty for translators and interpreters with regard to both traditional and innovating idioms. For example, when an Englishman dies we say *he kicked the bucket*, which is humorous, but in Arabic we say “he handed over/ delivered what he was entrusted with”, which is a reference to the soul that is leaving the body. Thus, it would be of great help to provide EFL learners with a useful description and interesting explanations of the historical and cultural backgrounds of the given idioms to enable them to acquire these idioms effectively.

In sum, EFL learners need to be exposed to idioms academically and to learn how to deal with their problematic areas. Familiarity with a wide range of idioms and the ability to use them appropriately in context are among the distinguishing marks of a native – like command of English. An EFL learner who tries to avoid using idioms will single himself out as a foreigner. An EFL learner who wants to gain high proficiency in the FL should learn more about idioms and how to deal with their difficulties, contact with native speakers and have access to good reference works and dictionaries of idioms. Textbook writers and language teachers should pay more attention to this area which proves to be a tall order to help our learners gain a fairly advanced level of English proficiency.

Literature on idioms showed that there were many relevant studies that had been carried out in the area of idioms. Many studies were concerned with the theoretical and syntactic nature of idioms. They had centered on describing idioms and their characteristics (Roberts, 1944; Hockett, 1958; Healy, 1969; Makkai, 1972, 1978; Cacciari, 1993; Gibbs, 1993; Glucksberg, 1993; Stock et al., 1993; Tabossi & Zardon, 1993) and their place in the grammar component (Weinreich, 1960, 1969; Katz & Postal, 1963; Chafe, 1968; Fraser, 1970; Newmeyer, 1972, 1974; Sugano, 1981; Reagan, 1987; Peterson & Burgess, 1993; Ifill, 2002). While some researchers were concerned with the comprehension of idioms in the L1 (Lodge & Leach, 1975; Ortony et al., 1978; Strand & Fraser, 1979; Gibbs, 1980; Cacciari, 1993; Nippold, 2003), others conducted studies on L2 learners or FLLs (Ross, 1978; Hajjaj & Kharma, 1989; Awwad, 1990; Alharthy, 1997; Huang, 2001; Liontas, 2002a; Eltahir, 2003). Additionally, some researchers looked at idioms in relation to context (Adkins, 1972; Nippold & Martin, 1989; Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Liontas, 2002a; Qualls et al., 2003; Bulut, 2004; Cain et al., 2004).

According to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, the majority of the researches on the acquisition of idioms had dealt with the problematic areas of comprehending or producing idioms or with the transfer in the acquisition of idioms; only few studies had tackled the topic of recognition of idioms. Thus, this present study investigated the problematic areas of recognizing and

comprehending English pure idioms with respect to the presence of context. Moreover, many studies were conducted among FLLs or Arab learners in general, only two of them were conducted on Saudi learners. While Alharthy (1997) conducted her study in Riyadh and was concerned with the effect of the degree of idiomaticity on learning English verb-particle combinations, Aldoubi (2003) conducted her study in Makka AlMukaramah and was concerned with the transfer in the acquisition of idioms. Due to this fact, this study could be considered to be among the first studies that had been conducted among the Saudi female learners in AlMadinah Almunawwarah. This study provided some great insights into the field of learning and acquiring English vocabulary in general and idioms in particular.

Objectives

The aim of this study was to investigate the ability of Saudi English major female students to recognize and comprehend idiomatic expressions in certain contexts.

Questions of the Study

This research attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1- Are Saudi female students able to recognize idioms when they encounter them?
- 2- Are Saudi female students able to comprehend idioms?

Subjects

The subjects of this study were students in the fourth year in the English department at the College of Education, Taibah University in AlMadinah Almunawwarah. Their ages ranged from 21 to 24. Sixty students were randomly chosen from this level. Fourth year students were chosen for the present study in particular because they had more experience with the English language and were supposed to be more familiar with English idioms than the students in the third, second or first levels.

Testing Materials

The testing materials for this study were developed by the researcher in the following way:

- 1- The researcher selected pure idioms using different dictionaries of idioms in both English and Arabic. The study dealt with full/pure English idioms according to the categorization of Carter (1987:60). This type of idiom had been chosen in particular because of its importance, popularity and frequency in the English language (Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, 1992). Pure idioms also appeared to be the most challenging and not an easily translated type (Chu, 1985; Huang, 2001; Colin, 2006) that needed more investigation.
- 2- Two types of tests were constructed. The first one contained eighteen items while the second one contained twelve items.

A: Translation Test:

The first test was a translation test. It consisted of two parts. The first part was a translation test of idioms in context and the second part was a translation test of idioms out of context. These types of test were designed to assess the recognition and comprehension of idioms. In the first part of the translation test, the students were asked to translate the sentences from English into Arabic. The words of the sentences were simple and accurate to facilitate the processes of recognizing and comprehending idioms from the context. Paragraphs were avoided to help students concentrate on recognizing and comprehending the idioms only and not to divert their attention to other difficulties such as the meanings of different vocabularies included in the sentences. For example:

Translate this sentence into Arabic:

- 1- We are planning a surprise party for John. Be careful when you talk to him and try not to spill the beans.
.....
- 2- You can kill two birds with one stone by inviting Suzan to the party so your mother can see her.
.....

In the second part of the translation test, the students were asked to translate the idiomatic expressions out of context from English into Arabic. For example:

Translate this expression into Arabic:

- 3- Fit the bill.
.....
- 4- Piece of cake.
.....

Learners' abilities to recognize and comprehend idiomatic meanings with and without contextual support were compared by these two types of the translation test.

B: Multiple Choice Test

The second test was a multiple-choice one to assess the comprehension of idioms. The students were asked to choose the correct equivalents of the underlined words from the four alternatives. For example:

Choose the correct equivalent of the underlined words:

- 1- Mr. John was sick for years. He kicked the bucket yesterday.
 - a- He hit the container.
 - b- He recovered from illness.
 - c- He died.
 - d- He got worse than before.

3- Concerning the validity of the tests, five faculty members at Taibah University, native speakers of Arabic and fluent in English, were asked to judge the process of selecting the idioms comprising the tests and their effectiveness and appropriateness. Two native speakers of English were asked to judge these tests as well.

4- The judges agreed on the number and the selection of idioms. According to their comments some distracting items of some idioms on the multiple-choice test were changed.

Procedure

The researcher distributed the tests, the translation and multiple-choice tests, among the Ss of the study. Students were interviewed individually. Directions were printed in English on all tests. Explanation of the directions was provided if necessary, but no further help was given. It was emphasized that all questions should be answered if at all possible. Students were given the translation tests first, followed by the multiple-choice test. In the translation tests, Ss were allowed to use the formal and informal Arabic idioms, because the main concern of this study was to assess the recognition and comprehension of English idioms.

All the data were collected from the written performance and the interviews of these students and then analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively using the SPSS software.

Scoring

Since the multiple-choice test was an objective one, answers were scored either correct (1 mark) or incorrect (0/ zero mark).

In the translation tests, the meanings of the idioms were classified as completely correct (2 marks), incorrect because of the negative transfer or literal translation (1 mark), and completely incorrect (0/ zero mark).

Analysis

1- All the responses were checked before the analysis to make sure that all items were answered.

2- Incomplete responses were excluded.

3- Spelling and other irrelevant factors in writing were disregarded.

4- The data was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

The study followed the qualitative method in the sense that it was exploratory and descriptive. It explored how Saudi female learners of English could make use of the context to recognize and comprehend English idioms. The researcher attempted to analyze and describe the responses of the students semantically. Incorrect responses reflected the difficulty of recognizing and interpreting English idioms. The researcher tried to describe the types of these difficulties and their causes. To achieve the validity and reliability of these tests, interviews were carried out on the students after the exam accomplishment. The idioms that were recognized and interpreted most correctly were also examined to see if

they had any characteristics in common. The study used some features of the quantitative method because it took the form of a cross-sectional study. It was outcome-oriented as it did not aim to trace any phenomenon diachronically. Thus, the method of this study appeared to be a synchronic, i.e. descriptive and exploratory cross-sectional one. Scores were then calculated and some types of statistical tests, frequency, percentages and mean values, were applied using the SPSS software.

In order to find the rating of the respondents for each idiom in each kind of test, the following statistical procedures were used:

In the translation and multiple-choice tests, frequency and percentage were used. A 'mean value' was necessarily added in order to indicate the overall recognition and comprehension of a particular idiom by all the respondents. This meant that the higher the 'mean value' was, the better the performance by the respondents in recognizing and comprehending that idiom.

Data Analysis

The data base consisted of two tests: a translation test and a multiple-choice test. The study was concerned with English pure idioms only. The sample of the study consisted of 60 students as discussed previously.

In the translation test, there were two parts. Part one was a translation test of idioms in context. There were (720) answers in this part. Students were asked to translate sentences from English into Arabic. This part produced (417) correct answers which were represented by (57.92%). Incorrect responses of this part consisted of two types, completely incorrect answers and incorrect answers due to negative transfer, literal translation of idioms into Arabic. There were (236) completely incorrect answers which were represented by (32.78%) and (67) incorrect answers because of negative transfer, literal translation, which were represented by (9.30%). Part two was a translation test of idioms out of context. There were (360) answers in this part. Students were asked to translate the idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic. This part produced (109) correct answers which were represented by (30.28%). Incorrect responses of this part consisted of two types, completely incorrect answers and incorrect answers due to negative transfer, literal translation of idioms into Arabic. There were (169) completely incorrect answers which were represented by (46.94%) and (82) incorrect answers because of negative transfer, literal translation, which were represented by (22.78%). These scores of idioms on the translation tests are shown below in table 1.

Table 1: General Performance on the Translation Tests of Idioms

	Translation Test of Idioms in Context		Translation Test of Idioms out of Context	
	F	%	F	%
Completely Correct Answers	417	57.92	109	30.28
Incorrect Answers because of Literal Translation	67	9.30	82	22.78
Completely Incorrect Answers	236	32.78	169	46.94
Total	720	100.00	360	100.00

F = Frequency (numbers of responses)

% = Percentage

Figure 1 shows the percentages of correct and incorrect responses by the Ss for the translation test of idioms in context.

Figure 1: General Performance on the Translation Test of Idioms in Context

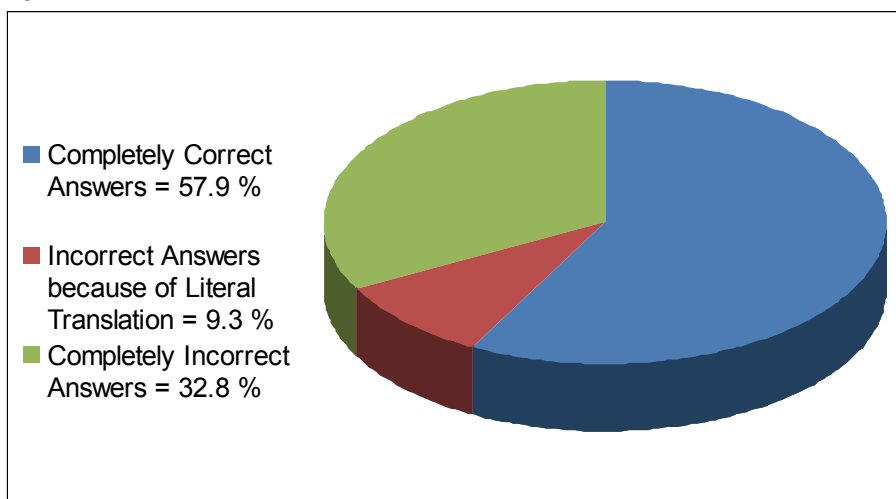
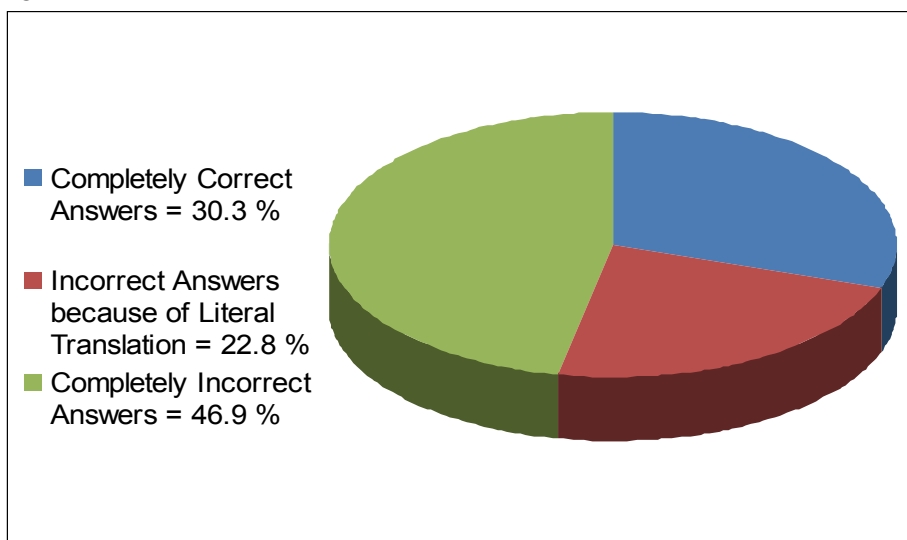


Figure 2 shows the percentages of correct and incorrect responses by the Ss for the translation test of idioms out of context.

Figure 2: General Performance on the Translation Test of Idioms out of Context



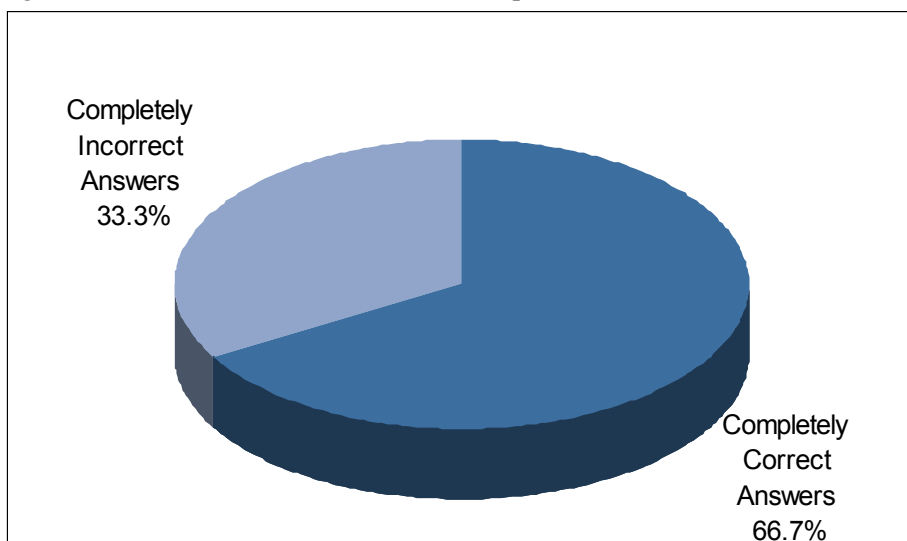
In the multiple-choice test, there were (720) answers. Students were asked to choose the correct equivalents of the underlined words from the four alternatives. This test produced (480) correct answers which were represented by (66.67%). Incorrect responses of this test were accounted for (240) which were represented by (33.33%). These scores of idioms on the multiple-choice test are shown below in table 2.

Table 2: General Performance on the Multiple-Choice Test of Idioms

	Multiple-Choice Test of Idioms	
	F	%
Completely Correct Answers	480	66.67
Completely Incorrect Answers	240	33.33
Total	720	100.00

Figure 3 shows the percentages of correct and incorrect responses by the Ss for the multiple-choice test of idioms.

Figure 3: General Performance on the Multiple-Choice Test of Idioms



These findings show the significance of the context in recognizing and comprehending English idioms.

Analysis and Discussion

An analysis of the results of the two tests showed that Ss were performing differently according to the types of the tests. Therefore, the effect of the differences among the types of tests was very strong.

Analysis of the Types of Idioms' Test

The differences on the recognition and comprehension of idioms between the two types of the translation tests were large. In the translation test of idioms in context, part one, Ss recognized and comprehended almost more than half of the idioms (57.92%). They represented that context played an essential role in facilitating the processes of recognizing and comprehending many idioms for them although most of these idioms were unknown. For this test, the percentages of the correct responses varied between (91.7%) and (21.7%) except for one idiom, *skate on thin ice*, which had (6.7%). Only four students answered it correctly. Three of them said that they made use of the context to find out the meaning of this idiom. Additionally, their performance in all tests was very good. The fourth student declared that she had lived in Britain for four years and heard many idioms there. She added that "British use idioms frequently" and suggested that "idioms should be integrated in their materials". Her performance in the exam was excellent (See Table 3).

Table 3: Scores on the Translation Test of Idioms in Context

No.	Idioms	Completely Correct		Incorrect because of Literal Translation		Completely Incorrect	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Spill the beans	49	81.7	4	6.7	7	11.6
2	Beat around the bush	52	86.7	1	1.7	7	11.6
3	Sleep on something	39	65	19	31.7	2	3.3
4	Kill two birds with one stone	53	88.3	6	10	1	1.7
5	Go by the book	45	75	3	5	12	20
6	Take someone for a ride	13	21.7	6	10	41	68.3
7	Storm in a teacup	19	31.7	5	8.3	36	60
8	Skate on thin ice	4	6.7	11	18.3	45	75
9	Change someone's mind	55	91.7	2	3.3	3	5
10	Up to one's ears	26	43.3	1	1.7	33	55
11	A pig in a poke	27	45	1	1.7	32	53.3
1	(Straight) From the horse's mouth	35	58.3	8	13.3	17	28.3

In contrast, the Ss' performance varied on the translation test of idioms out of context. For this test, Ss had (30.28%) of the correct answers. Students were not able to recognize and comprehend idioms well except for two idioms, *strike while the iron is hot* /yaTruq alHadi:d wahwa saxin/ and *lend me a hand* /mudda li: yada al'awn/. For the first idiom, *strike while the iron is hot*, most of the students recognized and comprehended it effectively because they knew it previously. They considered it an Arabic idiom that had an identical one in the English language. Moreover, it appeared that they were not aware of its origin. This English idiom referred to a blacksmith making a shoe for a horse. He had to strike/hammer the iron while it was hot enough to bend into the shape of the shoe (Oxford Idioms dictionary for learners of English, 2004:382). This idiom had been translated literally into the Arabic language by unskilled translators. Then it had been used in the Arabic language as an Arabic idiom. This could be due to the effects of the English language on the Arabic language. It could be regarded as one of the borrowings from English into Arabic. Therefore, translators should be more careful while translating idioms from one language to another. They should take into their considerations many things about the languages such as the culture, history, and nature. Most of the students recognized and comprehended the second idiom, *lend someone a hand*, because it was an English one that had a similar idiom in the Arabic language /mudda li:

yada al^ʿawn/. They made use of their L1 (Arabic) to find out the meaning of this idiom which resulted in positive transfer. Thus, apart from these two idioms, the percentages of the correct responses for this test ranged from (20%) to (1.7%) as shown below in table 4. This result indicated that there was a weakness in the recognition and comprehension of isolated idioms by the Ss. The Ss declared that such idioms were difficult to recognize and comprehend because of the absence of a meaningful context which resulted in mistranslation or literal translation (See Table 4).

Table 4: Scores on the Translation Test of Idioms out of Context

No	Idioms	Completely Correct		Incorrect because of Literal Translation		Completely Incorrect	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Fit the bill	12	20	6	10	42	70
2	A shot in the dark	1	1.7	21	35	38	63.3
3	Come to a head	2	3.3	12	20	46	76.7
4	Strike while the iron is hot	49	81.7	0	0	11	18.3
5	Lend someone a hand	39	65	5	8.3	16	26.7
6	Piece of cake	6	10	38	63.3	16	26.7

In the multiple-choice test of idioms in context, Ss comprehended almost most of the idioms by the help of the context. The percentages of the correct responses for this test ranged from (96.7%) to (21.7%) as shown below in table 5. Students indicated that context had a significant effect in facilitating the process of comprehending many English idioms for them (See Table 5).

Table 5: Scores on the Multiple-Choice Test of Idioms

No.	Idioms	Correct		Incorrect	
		F	%	F	%
1	Kick the bucket	39	65	21	35
2	Take someone under one's wing	39	65	21	35
3	Pull someone's leg	13	21.7	47	78.3
4	Put their heads together	54	90	6	10
5	Read between the lines	47	78.3	13	21.7
6	Put the cart before the horse	18	30	42	70
7	Cut no ice	39	65	21	35

8	Put oneself in someone else's shoes	36	60	24	40
9	Rain cats and dogs	30	50	30	50
10	Have a whale of a time	58	96.7	2	3.3
11	Keep the wolf from the door	55	91.7	5	8.3
12	Smell a rat	52	86.7	8	13.3

The results of this section of the study revealed that Ss were able to recognize and comprehend idioms in context more than idioms out of context and that context constituted an essential role in facilitating the processes of recognizing and comprehending idioms effectively, thus confirming the conclusions of Adkins (1972) as well as Nippold and Martin (1989); Levorato and Cacciair (1999); Liontas (2002a); Qualls et al. (2003); Bulut (2004); Cain et al. (2004); and Norbury (2004).

Analysis of the Characteristics of Idioms

This study used the mean value to discriminate between idioms that were recognized and comprehended by the Ss more easily than the others. It was a step toward identifying the characteristics of the easy idioms. The performance of the Ss of this study on the recognition and comprehension tests of English pure idioms revealed that some idioms were easier than others. Those idioms which were easier to recognize and comprehend seemed to be familiar or more frequently used, simple or short with known vocabulary, semantically transparent and not too colloquial, thus confirming the findings of Ortony et al. (1978) as well as Irujo (1984, 1986a); Abisamra (2002); Aldoubi (2003); Liu (2003) and Andreou and Galantomos (2007).

Concerning the familiar or more frequently used idioms, most of the Ss succeeded in recognizing and comprehending most of these idioms. Some examples of the familiar or more frequently used idioms from this study are as follows:

- 1- *Change someone's mind.*
- 2- *Put their heads together.*
- 3- *Beat around the bush.*

Moreover, most of the Ss did well in recognizing and comprehending most of the simple or short with known vocabulary idioms. Some examples of the simple or short with known vocabulary idioms from this study are as follows:

- 1- *Have a whale of a time.*
- 2- *Keep the wolf from the door.*
- 3- *Smell a rat.*
- 4- *Sleep on something.*

Finally, regarding the semantically transparent and not too colloquial idioms, most of the Ss also performed well in recognizing and comprehending most of

these idioms. Some examples of the transparent idioms from this study are as follows:

- 1- *Put their heads together.*
- 2- *Spill the beans.*
- 3- *Go by the book.*
- 4- *Take someone under one's wing* (See Tables 6 and 7).

Tables 6 and 7 gradually display the mean values of the idioms from the highest mean value to the lowest one in the translation test of idioms in context and in the multiple-choice test. The highest 'mean value' represented the easiest idiom that had been easily recognized and comprehended by the Ss of this study. On the other hand, the lowest 'mean value' represented the most difficult idiom for the Ss to recognize and comprehend.

Table 6: Mean Values of Idioms in the Translation Test of Idioms in Context

Numbers of statements	Idioms	Mean Value
9	Change someone's mind	1.83
4	Kill two birds with one stone	1.77
2	Beat around the bush	1.73
1	Spill the beans	1.63
5	Go by the book	1.50
3	Sleep on something	1.30
12	(Straight) From the horse's mouth	1.17
11	A pig in a poke	0.90
10	Up to one's ears	0.87
7	Storm in a teacup	0.63
6	Take someone for a ride	0.43
8	Skate on thin ice	0.13

Figure 4 shows the mean values of idioms in the translation test of idioms in context.

Figure 4: Mean Values of Idioms in the Translation Test of Idioms in Context

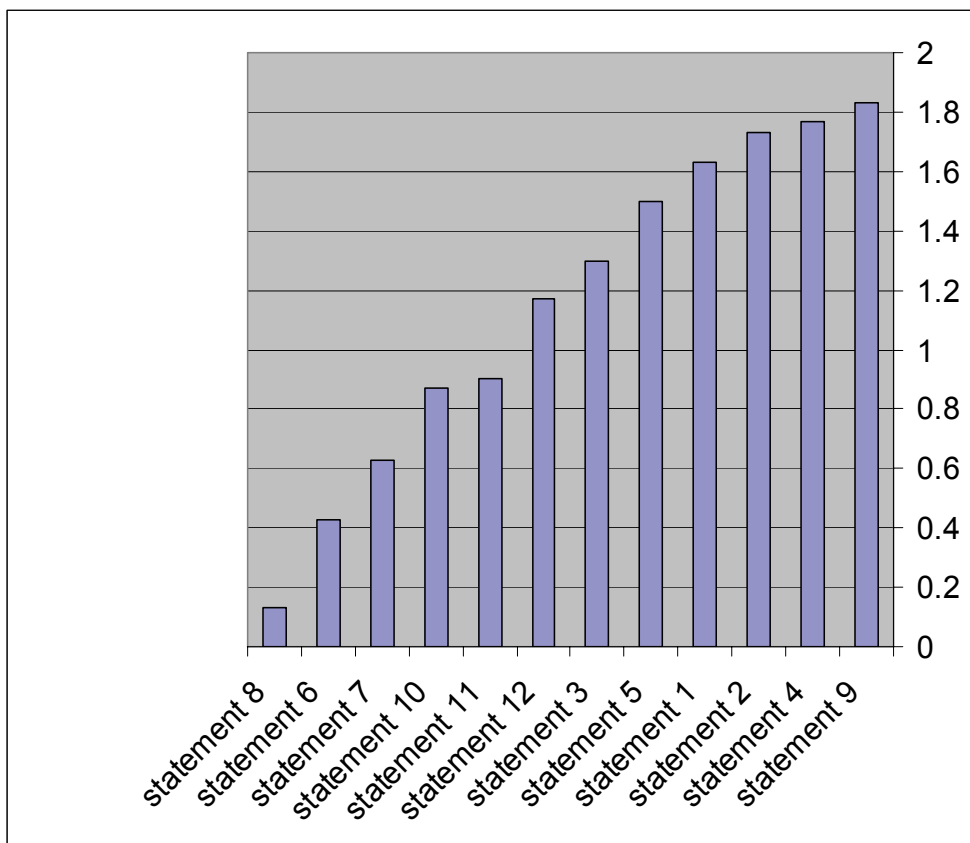
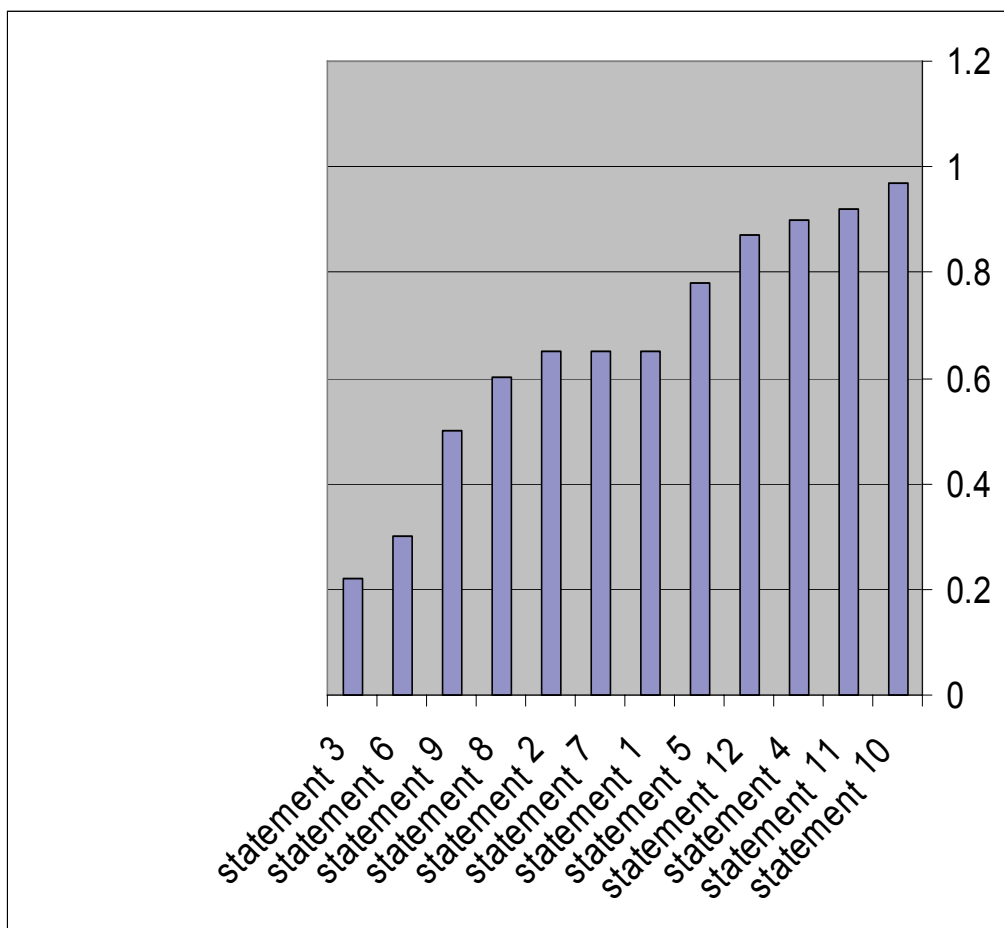


Table 7: Mean Values of Idioms in the Multiple-Choice Test of Idioms

Numbers of Statements	Idioms	Mean Value
10	Have a whale of a time	0.97
11	Keep the wolf from the door	0.92
4	Put their heads together	0.90
12	Smell a rat	0.87
5	Read between the lines	0.78
1	Kick the bucket	0.65
7	Cut no ice	0.65
2	Take someone under one's wing	0.65

8	Put oneself in someone else's shoes	0.60
9	Rain cats and dogs	0.50
6	Put the cart before the horse	0.30
3	Pull someone's leg	0.22

Figure 5: Mean Values of Idioms in the Multiple-Choice Test of Idioms



Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that most of the Ss of this study, Saudi English major female students, are able to recognize and comprehend idioms in context more than idioms out of context. They also support the notion that context has a significant effect in facilitating the processes of recognizing and comprehending English idioms effectively.

It also appears that some idioms are more easily recognized and comprehended than others because they are familiar or frequently used, simple or short with known vocabulary, semantically transparent and not too colloquial.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made:

1. The results of this study indicate that there is a definite need for acquiring English idioms properly by EFL learners. Idioms add color to the language, help people to emphasize and make their observations, judgments and explanations lively and interesting. Idioms help people to communicate a great deal of information in just a few words. They are used frequently in the English language which makes it difficult to speak or write without using them. EFL learners face idioms everywhere. Therefore, an EFL learner who avoids using them will single himself out as a foreigner. It is obvious that the ability to recognize, comprehend and produce idiomatic expression is an essential component of proficiency in the English language. Thus, learning English idioms should be considered an integral part of learning English vocabulary. Course designers have to consider this problematic area of English idioms and their cultural backgrounds in their present work. They should concentrate on teaching English idioms and how to deal with them when preparing an enhancement teaching material or a textbook. They should also attempt to provide detailed explanations with more drills in English idioms, their cultural and historical backgrounds, and their appropriate usage which in turn can contribute to the improvement of students' recognition and comprehension of idioms.
2. The results reveal the important role context plays in facilitating the processes of recognizing and comprehending English idioms effectively. Therefore, it would be helpful for EFL learners to learn more English idioms in rich contexts to enable them to guess their meanings correctly. Moreover, teachers should help students focus on the importance of learning idioms in the English language, how to deal with them, and when to use them appropriately. Furthermore, teachers should encourage students to use these idioms in their speech or writing in order to make them proficient in the English language; since there is no doubt that the teachers' role in the process of learning is considered the most important one. Several techniques, approaches, and activities should also be introduced to EFL learners to help them deal with English idioms and guess their meaning from context. Teachers can use some of these techniques and activities and apply them in their classes according to their students' levels of proficiency.

3. Finally, students must change their attitudes toward learning. They have to learn English not merely for examinations but for communication as well. They should read different English printed materials such as novels, plays, stories, and newspapers, watch English programs or films, and listen to cassettes by native speakers of English. They should be given ample opportunity to practice using idioms in non-threatening, naturalistic situations, to improve their confidence in using these idioms correctly. Moreover, they can be encouraged to write sentences, paragraphs, or essays containing some of English idioms and consult their teachers whenever necessary. With these practices, students will be able to overcome this problematic area of acquiring English idioms and manage to communicate in an effective way in and outside the classroom.

Appendix: Idiom List

No.	English Pure Idioms	Their Meanings
1	Spill the beans	To reveal a secret or a surprise by accident
2	Beat around the bush	To avoid saying something directly or to stall
3	Sleep on something	Not making a decision until the following day so that you can have more time to think about it
4	Kill two birds with one stone	To manage to achieve two aims by doing one thing
5	Go by the book	To follow the rules exactly
6	Take someone for a ride	To trick or deceive someone
7	Storm in a teacup	A small or unimportant problem which is treated as much more serious than it really is
8	Skate on thin ice	To be in a risky situation or to do something dangerous
9	Change someone's mind	To change your decision or opinion
10	Up to one's ears	Having a lot of things to do
11	A pig in a poke	To accept something without having seen or examined it
12	Straight from the horse's mouth	From an authoritative or dependable source
13	Fit the bill	To be exactly the thing that is needed
14	A shot in the dark	A random or wild guess or try

15	Come to a head	To come to a point when a problem must be solved
16	Strike while the iron is hot	To do something at the best possible time
17	Lend someone a hand	To give someone some help, not necessarily with the hands
18	Piece of cake	Very easy
19	Kick the bucket	To die
20	Take someone under one's wing	To take over and care for a person
21	Pull someone's leg	To kid or trick someone
22	Put their heads together	To discuss or plan something together
23	Read between the lines	To infer or discover something from something else
24	Put the cart before the horse	To have things in the wrong order
25	Cut no ice	To have no influence on someone
26	Put oneself in Tom's shoes	To allow oneself to see or experience something from someone else's point of view
27	Rain cats and dogs	To rain very heavily
28	Have a whale of a time	To have an exciting time
29	Keep the wolf from the door	To live without suffering acute poverty
30	Smell a rat	To suspect that something is wrong

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