

# Investigating Difficulties that Face Sudanese Students in Understanding English Idiomatic Expressions

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**Abstract:** *This study aims at investigating the difficulties of understanding English idiomatic expressions that encounter Sudanese students. This study adopted the descriptive analytical method of research. The researcher designed questionnaires on idiomatic expressions for ELT teachers at different universities. This study and difficulties encountered by the Sudanese students and strategies used to overcome these problems and difficult penetrating into the research problems, the researcher raised three questions about cultural difficulties of English idiomatic expressions. Moreover, three hypotheses were formulated corresponding to these five questions. Findings revealed low ability of the students in understanding English idiomatic expressions. Finding also revealed that English students did not use particular strategy while encountering unknown idioms. Students better understand idiom in context. Finally, the researcher proposed conducting research on the effect of context on teaching idiomatic expressions.*

**Keywords:** Idiomatic Expression

## 1. Introduction

This study aims at investigating the main difficulties face Sudanese students in understanding idiomatic expressions in English. Idioms are considered by many researchers as a colorful side language. Therefore learners must see the language through rose-colored glasses to learn every single item that leads to proficiency. In fact, the level of command of idioms serves as an important indicator of L2 proficiency. One of the main difficulties of idiom learning is that idioms are often unpredictable in meaning, that's, their meanings cannot always be derived from the literal meaning of constituent parts. In pedagogical sense, teaching vocabulary must be inseparable part from teaching idioms. Teaching and learning of idioms in L2 is considered a hard task. One of the reasons is that a considerable number of idioms are figurative in nature. That's their overall meaning cannot be obtained by simple adding up the literal meaning of the item. Taken together these factors make idioms most difficult aspects of L2 teaching and learning.

## 2. What is an idiom?

It's important to realize that "idioms are not only colloquial expressions, as many people believe. They appear in formal style and in slang"

An idiom can be defined as a number of words which, when brought together give a different meaning from the individual meanings of each word.

Kinds of idioms:

Idioms take different forms or structures.

An idiom can have a regular structure or an irregular, grammatically incorrect structure.

The clarity of meaning does not depend on the grammatical correctness.

- 1) Form irregular, meaning clear as in do the dirty on someone.
- 2) Form irregular meaning unclear as in cut no ice, bring the house down.
- 3) We find that most idioms belong to the second group.
- 4) Where the form is irregular but the meaning is unclear.

### Where and when to use idioms:

One of the major difficulties for the learners' knowledge is; in which situations it is correct to use idioms. Informal idioms are used in every day spoken English and in personal letters. Learners are advised to avoid using slang and taboo expressions until their mastery of expressions is complete. A further difficulty knows whether an idiom is appropriate or natural in a certain situation.

## 3. Definition of Idioms

Defining idioms, however, has never been easy. Researchers in the field have made various attempts to define idioms or what constitutes an idiom, due to different theoretical classification. Criteria adopted in the definition. An idiom is an institutionalized construction that is composed of two or more lexical items and has the composite structure of a phrase or semi- clause. Moreover, it is considerably fixed meaning can't be taken as combination of the meanings of its component parts. The common phrase Kick the bucket has nothing to do with either kicking or buckets but means simply, "to die". In other words idioms are not literal expressions.

Moon (2006) define idiom as fixed sequence of words which has meaning beyond that of constituent parts. An idiom is an expression whose overall figurative meaning can't be derived from the meaning of its parts (Marlies, 1995; p.283). An idiom is a figurative expression that usually can be interpreted literally but that takes a no literally but that tasks con text ( Cain et al, 2005; p.66).

The role of culture in understanding idioms:

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Understanding the lexicon of English demands more than knowing the denotative meaning of words. It requires its speakers to have connotative word comprehension and more, an understanding of figurative meaning or language. Idioms fall into this final category (Jacqueline Ambrose, 2003).

It appears that it's easy to comprehend and interpret an idiom when more similar to someone. Exposure to wide range of idioms may play an important role in idiom comprehension. Therefore more familiarity of idioms, the more frequently are use (Fuste-Herrman,2008). Word familiarity has significant influence on word recognition Connie et al, (1995) and the comprehension of new metaphors (Blasko and Connie, 1993).

Schweigbrt (1986) studied the relationship between familiarity and idioms processing. Reading rates for sentences containing highly familiar idioms were shorter than those for sentences containing low familiar idioms. The facts that highly familiar idioms were understood more quickly than less familiar idioms. Nippold& Taylor (1995) stated that the frequency with which an idiom occurs in a language is often defined as familiarity; however frequency and familiarity is both moderated by culture. Familiarity is relative and depends on such factors as geographical location linguistic background (including dialect), culture and age (Nippoid&Rudinsk, 1993).

It appears that idiom comprehension is easier when an idiom is more familiar to someone because less conceptual analysis is required (qualls&Harris, 1999). Exposure may play an important role in idiom comprehension since having more salient (Norbury, 2004)

Glucksberg (2001) described idioms as secret language and language owned by culture that. Culture that one has to be stepped in other words, idioms vary in frequency and familiarity depending on variables like demographic characteristics, cultural and linguistic identification characteristics and linguistic identification. The role of the context in Idiom comprehension:

Cain et al (2005) demonstrated that there are three factors in idioms comprehension: Familiarity, transparency and context. They state that idioms that are present in text are easier to understand than those are presented in texts are easier to understand than those are presented in isolation. Cain et al (2005) maintain that context might facilitate the interpretation of figurative language by providing the necessary semantic information from reader (listener) can extract are infer the appropriate sense of expression (p.67) for them, contexts are important for less common idioms whose meaning are not fully known, particulate for unfamiliar opaque idioms whose meanings not fully derivable through semantic analysis of phrase (p, 67). In this study, the focus is on the specific problems students have in understanding idiomatic expressions and using idioms correctly and the role of context in idiom comprehension.

#### **4. Previous Studies**

According to cooper (1998) states that the effect of context on learning idiomatic expressions and long term effect of

context on the learners' retention. Sixty upper- intermediate Iranian EFL learners participated in this study. Twenty participants first experimental group ( extended- context group ) were taught the idiomatic expressions through brief stories and twenty participants in the second experimental group (limited – context group ) were exposed to individual sentences in order to learn the idioms, while the participants in the control group ( de-contextualized group ). Underwent the same process with only simple definitions. Results of data analysis showed that the participants in the extended – context group achieved significantly higher scores on both immediate and delayed post test than the participants in the limited – context and de-contextualized groups. This indicates that the context has a positive effect on learning idioms.

Accordingly, OktayYagiz (1968) handled that the close relationship between idioms and culture and their mutual interactions have high significance. The inextricable connection highlights various manifestation of conventionalized language including idiomatic expressions as one of the most vital language uses reflecting culture in real life. Like other types of figurative, idioms appear to be natural decoders of customs, cultural beliefs, social conventions and norms. Idioms as a major component of native – like communication enables learner of a language to understand emotion, thoughts and views of the speakers of target language. For this reason, learning idioms provides learners with a significant chance acquire information about the underlying parameters of a language. Awareness of figurative language particular idioms will improve teaching and assist learners to better communication strategies.

Accordingly Nourawinis Ibrahim Saleh (1996) claims that: Idioms are difficult due to a number of factors that started from introducing the idiomatic expressions in the classroom by the teachers and their figurative nature. Additionally, the low frequent vocabulary was one of the factors that students understanding of the idioms. The most successful strategies were guessing from the context as well as referring to L1 since the expression exists in both languages.

Moreover, wary (2000) states that mastering idioms is required for successful language learning and native- like command of language. According to Lazar (1996), figurative expressions have been given little attention than they deserve. In addition, the emphasis on mastery of grammar allows little time for the other aspects of language competence, such as the ability to understand idiomatic expressions.

Irjuo,Suzanne (1984) Transfer in the Acquisition in a Second language – Boston University. The above paper discussed the impact of transfer from mother tongue on the acquisition of L2. The concept of transfer is based on the idea that previous learning affects subsequent learning.

She claims that learners would show the evidence of positive transfer with identical idioms in the target language and they would show evidence of negative or positive transfer with different idioms in both source and target language- the results of the study supported her hypotheses . Subjects comprehend identical idioms as well as similar idioms and

both were comprehended better than different idioms. Her study also implies that idioms are not always considered non-transferable in the light of these findings. The present study suggests that the teaching of idioms should encourage learners to transfer from their mother tongue to understand idioms in the target language.

Shamat, Lemya (2002) *Idiomatcity and language learning and Teaching* (PhD thesis) University of Khartoum. She argues that curricula and syllabi were under the influence of structuralism and that idioms were regarded as instructional luxury to which syllabi paid less attention. She proposed that learners should basically study language communicative clues and conversational clues of day to day performance. She conducted her research in a Sudanese context and found that students' performance was generally poor and unsatisfactory and that there was a lack of familiarity with the subject matter of idioms. She argued that learning multi word expressions should be focused on curriculum and syllabi and learners should master them to improve their communicative skills.

She confirmed that the Knowledge of idiomatcity has an effect on the process of learning as well as learners' receptive and productive communicative competence. Many factors have an effect on the comprehension of idioms. They can influence the processing speed and Understandability of the idioms. Some of these factors include the familiarity, transparency, and context of use of the idioms. Idiom familiarity is typically defined as how frequently an idiom is encountered in a language community. Subjective ratings of idiom familiarity are usually obtained from members of the language community. An example of a more familiar English idiom is *pain in the neck*; while a less familiar idiom is *paddle his own canoe*. Research demonstrated that familiar idioms are processed quicker and more accurately than unfamiliar ones. As the dual idiom representation model suggests, highly familiar idioms may lead to direct memory retrieval. Processing unfamiliar idioms, on the other hand, requires contextual information and commonsense knowledge. Transparency Idiom transparency can refer to the "literalness" of an idiom; how easy it is to understand an idiom based on the words it contains. Idioms can be sorted depending on their degree of transparency. Three categories of idioms have been identified: *Decomposable*, *abnormally decomposable* and *no decomposable*. Decomposable idioms are composed of words that literally contribute to their overall figurative meaning, e.g. *pop the question*. *Pop* refers to *sudden* and *the question* refers to *marriage proposal*. Abnormally decomposable idioms contain words that are associated with the overall figurative meaning of the idiom but in a metaphorical way, e.g. *spill the beans*. *Spill* mapping on to *reveal* and *beans* metaphorically representing *secret*. No decomposable idioms are made of words that do not reflect their idiomatic meaning, e.g. *kick the bucket*. People are found to respond to both types of decomposable idioms faster than no decomposable ones. Research in children highlighted the important effects of context on idiom comprehension. It was found that children understand idiomatic expression more accurately when they are shown in informative contexts than when they are presented in isolation. When they are encountered out of context, children tended to interpret idioms literally. The ability to

use contextual information in language processing has also been found to influence children's performance in idiom comprehension. Adults, however, are more affected by the familiarity of the idiom. Comprehension of idioms is the act of processing and understanding idioms. Idioms are a common type of figure of speech. Based on common linguistic definitions, an idiom is a combination of words that contains a meaning that cannot be understood based on the literal definition of the individual words. An example of an idiom is *hit the sack*, which means *to go to bed*. It can be used in a sentence like the following: *I'm so exhausted that I'm going to hit the sack now*. Traditionally, idiom comprehension was thought to require a distinct processing mode other than literal language comprehension. Subsequent research suggested that the comprehension of idioms could be explained in the context of general models of comprehension. Contemporary researchers have also posited that different modes of processing are required for distinct types of idioms. Factors, such as idiom familiarity, transparency, and context are found to influence idiom comprehension.

Recent neuron linguistic research has found, using various techniques, several neural substrates that are associated with idiom comprehension, such as the left temporal and prefrontal cortex.

## 5. Results and Discussion

Data of this study was analyzed using statistical package for social science (SPSS). The analysis of this data based on descriptive analysis, mean and standard deviation. All these items were applied in order to fulfill the objective of this study. Questionnaire is to get the mean, and the average of the problem size. For the questionnaire, the mean and standard deviation and frequency were calculated using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS).

The findings show what are the main difficulties encountered by the students in using idiomatic expression and also reveal what strategies were used.

- 1) Students have difficulty in understanding idioms because their meanings are not clear.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample; strongly agree (60.0%), agree by (33.3%), disagree (6.7) and there is no natural and strongly disagree. The results indicate that Students have difficulty in understanding idioms because their meaning is not clear.
- 2) Idioms are difficult to understand because they are not taught well in the English classroom.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample; strongly agree (33.3%), agree by (50.0%), neutral (10.0%) disagree (6.7), and there is no strongly disagree. The results indicate that Idioms are difficult to understand because they are not taught well in the English classroom.
- 3) Students translate the meaning of idioms literally into their mother tongue.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample; strongly agree (53.3%), agree by (33.3%), neutral (3.3%) disagree (10.0), and there is no strongly disagree. The results indicate that Students translate the meaning of idioms literally into their mother tongue.

- 4) Lack of English cultural background is a main problem in understanding idioms by students.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (63.3%), agree by (30.3%), neutral (3.3%) disagree (3.3%), and there is no strongly disagree. The results indicate that Lack of English cultural background is a main problem in understanding idioms by students.
- 5) Context plays a vital role in understanding idiomatic expression  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (56.7%), agree by (26.7%), neutral (6.7%) disagree (10.0%), and there is no strongly disagree. The result indicates that Context plays a vital role in understanding idiomatic expressions.
- 6) It is easy for students to predict the meaning of idioms without the context.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (6.7%), agree by (16.7%), neutral (13.3%) disagree (50.0%), and strongly disagree (13.3%) The result indicates that, it is not easy for students to predict the meaning of idioms without the context.
- 7) Students can better understand idioms in context.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (46.7%), agree by (40.0%), neutral (6.7%) disagree (6.7%), and there is no strongly disagree. The result indicates that Students can better understand idioms in context.
- 8) Students can visual aid (pictures) to understand idioms.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (30.0%), agree by (40.0%), neutral (20.0%) disagree (6.7%), and strongly disagree (3.3%). The result indicates that students can use visual aid (pictures) to understand idioms.
- 9) Only little attention is paid to idiomatic expressions in Sudanese university curriculum.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (50.0%), agree by (30.0%), neutral (10.0%) disagree (10.0%), and there is no strongly disagree. The result indicates that only little attention is paid to idiomatic expressions in Sudanese university curriculum.
- 10) Sudanese syllabus contains enough idiomatic expressions.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (16.7%), agree by (6.7%), neutral (23.3%) disagree (33.3%), and strongly disagree (20.0%). The result indicates that Sudanese syllabus does not contain enough idiomatic expressions.
- 11) Sudanese curriculum does not contain idioms in context.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (23.3%), agree by (20.0%), neutral (30.0%) disagree (23.3%), and strongly disagree (3.3%). The result indicates that most of the respondents are neutral.
- 12) Students do not understand idioms because of lack of cultural background.  
Hereafter are the distributions of sample;strongly agree (53.7%), agree by (30.0%), neutral (3.3%) disagree (10.0%), and there is no strongly disagree. The result indicates that English Students do not understand idioms because of lack of cultural background, which means that the cultural background is very important in understanding idiomatic expressions.

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